

IMAGINED FUTURES: INTERPRETATION, IMAGINATION, AND
DISCIPLINE IN HINDU TRINIDAD

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Globalization has inaugurated many rapid changes in local communities throughout the world. The globalization of media, both electronic and print, has introduced new pressures for local communities to confront while also opening up new imaginative possibilities. As many observers have noted, transnational media transform local public cultures, or shared imaginative spaces, but never in predictable, totally hegemonic ways. This dissertation focuses on the efforts of a small Hindu community called the Hindu Prachar Kendra located in Trinidad, West Indies, as they develop critical strategies that help their children read, negotiate, and in some cases contribute to local and global public cultures. I argue that though many Hindu parents and teachers of the Kendra share anxieties about the effects of local and global popular cultures on their children, they also use many features, ideas, and texts emerging from imaginative media in creative ways. Furthermore, their concerns about media shape their interpretation and instruction of Hindu practice.

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If there is a shower in the form of beautiful ideas, lovely pearls make their appearance in the form of poetic effusions. If those pearls are pierced with skill and strung together on the beautiful thread of Sri Rama's exploits, and if noble souls wear them in their innocent heart, grace in the form of excessive fondness is the result.

~ Sri Ramacaritamanas

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A philosophy is never a house; it is a construction site. But its completion is not that of science. Science draws up a multitude of finished parts and only its whole presents empty spaces, whereas in our striving for cohesiveness, the incompleteness is not restricted to the lacunae of thought; at every point, at each point, there is the impossibility of the final state.

~ George Bataille, *Theory of Religion*

Of course, we all knew that Althusser or Gramsci existed, but we felt that the level at which they approached things left out the revealing and significant details of the real world.

~ Paul Rabinow, *Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary*

In 1995 Trinidad elected its first Indo-Trinidadian prime minister. Indo-Trinidadians were jubilant. A sense of triumph over the odds reverberated throughout the community. For many Indo-Trinidadians, their day as a political force in the country had arrived. But the election was not without controversy, drama, and threatening grandstanding by the People's National Movement (PNM), now the opposition party in Parliament. As with nearly all major elections in Trinidad, ethnic tension between Afro- and Indo-Trinidadians reached a fever pitch, fomented in large part by the PNM and its supporters (Ryan 1996; Munasinghe 2001: 5). Animosity between the groups was at a historic high, and solidarity at a new low. BBC journalists covering the election predicted inter-ethnic violence, rioting, and possibly small-scale civil war¹. One journalist from the BBC was in contact with Raviji, a prominent leader in Trinidad's Hindu community, throughout the

¹ Of the equally acrimonious election of 2002, one BBC journalist writes, "Some people fear Trinidad could become another Bosnia, Fiji or Northern Ireland" (Goldsmith 2002). In a characteristic flourish of journalistic hyperbole, she reports that ethnic relations in Trinidad were "becoming increasingly bitter and factionalized."

tumultuous election of 1995. Recounting the event for me one afternoon, Raviji remembers the journalist asking him if he believed the tension would erupt into violence. He recalled telling him, “to all appearances it looks like there will be violence, but I don’t think there will be.” He elaborated further, “Trinidadians aren’t like that. An Indian may not like an African. He may talk racial (racist) things about him. But if he sees an African man coming in his car he’ll let him pass. And the African will do the same for him.”

On May 26, 2010 Kamla Persad-Bissessar was sworn in as Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, becoming Trinidad’s first female prime minister and second Indo-Trinidadian. The event was remarkable for its anticlimax. There were no boisterous protests or marches in the streets. The University of Woodford Square, a small plaza in downtown Port of Spain across the street from Parliament’s Red House and the site of many political rallies, was tranquil as usual, populated by people on lunch break, soda vendors, the text book hawkers whose merchandise is splayed in disorganized piles on large sheets of strained plywood, and assorted others finding respite in the shade of the park’s many trees. The local news stations covered the election and Kamla’s cabinet posts, but nothing riotous among the electorate. Absent also were acrimonious letters to the editor in the three dailies decrying the graft of the United National Congress (UNC, Kamla’s party²) and the inevitable calamity they will bring down on Trinidad and

² Though the UNC remains Kamla’s primary party, she and her party were aided to victory by the People’s Partnership, a coalition consisting of the United National Congress (UNC, 21 seats), Congress of the People (COP, 6 seats), Tobago Organization of the People (TOP, 2 seats), the National Joint Action Committee (NJAC, formed in the 1970’s, incidentally, by the radical Makandal Daaga to challenge Trinidad’s first Prime Minister Eric Williams), and the Movement for Social Justice (MSJ). Emicly, the UNC has long been cast as the “Indo-Trini” party, while the PNM is often regarded as the “Afro-Trini” party, both dubious and problematic generalizations, but not without some degree of historical accuracy (see Ryan 2009). Though more research remains to be done

Tobago. I saw no protest signs, no anti-UNC or Kamla propaganda. Surprisingly, 2010's post-election vitriol was in short supply.

As a socio-political event, Kamla's uncontroversial election signals recent shifts in Trinidadian public culture that are the focus of this thesis. Employing what Rabinow (2008) and others (see Faubion and Marcus 2009; Augé 2007) have called an "anthropology of the contemporary", I argue that the categories of knowledge and cultural patterns concerning race and ethnicity left by the colonial regime are yielding to new sets of concerns inaugurated by ideological changes in global, neo-liberal capitalism. Centering on a small but active community of Hindus in Central Trinidad, my work attempts to describe and analyze how this community negotiates contemporary local and global cultural terrains through the study and performance of sacred texts, primarily the *Ramayana*, and modified Hindu practice. The community, called the Hindu Prachar Kendra, located in Central Trinidad, about 10 miles east of the bustling city of Chaguanas, acts as a *mandir* (temple), a community center, and a summer school program focusing on the study and performance of the great Hindu epic *The Ramayana*. This thesis focuses on the Hindu Prachar Kendra (called locally 'the Kendra') and the community it serves, analyzing how they interpret both Trinidadian and global public culture in light of their success oriented goals.

In the five years I have been working with the Kendra community, talking with the teachers and program designers, meeting with parents, and observing classroom lessons, the theme that most conspicuously emerged was one of discipline. The teachers

on this point, on the surface, it appears that the People's Partnership is one of, if not the most, ethnically diverse parties/coalitions to win Parliament with 29 seats of 41, or 59 percent.

and parents uttered the word countless times a day, insisting that without it, today's generation would be lost in a cultural morass of decadence and self-indulgence. Shrutiji, one of the head teachers at the Kendra, routinely raised the specter of failure for those who cannot learn discipline, evoking dark images of a lawless Trinidadian culture that lures the young into a life of meaningless hedonism. Discussions and admonitions about discipline were nearly always broached in conjunction with competition. As we will see throughout the rest of this thesis, the parallel themes of discipline and competition are the axis mundi of Kendra discourse and animate the whole of their pedagogy. I argue that in the face of an increasingly competitive and individualistic economic ethos, concerns about identity maintenance are giving way to other sets of anxieties, namely, professional success. Though ethnic and religious identity maintenance remain salient features of Kendra programs, their curriculum attempts to foster values and attitudes commensurate with the demands of contemporary professionalism. As Shrutiji told me, "Today's youth have too many distractions. They do not want to learn. They have no respect for their elders. So they must be taught these things. You cannot be successful without discipline." This thesis explores the ways in which the Kendra and its related programs interpret the values, practices, and ideologies circulating in local and global public cultural spaces. I focus specifically on their interpretation of both local and global popular culture texts and practices such as music, film, video games, fêtes (dance parties), and advertising. Their complex, often paradoxical, relationship to these texts underscores changing knowledge patterns and an increasing focus on discipline and professionalism.

The Shifting Valences of Ethnic Identity

I made a point of bringing up Kamla's victory with everyone I could, curious to get a sense, even if anecdotal, of how Trinidadians felt about Kamla (as she is called locally). Nearly everyone I talked to liked her. Some were genuinely enthusiastic about her potential to reform Trinidad after years of corruption and desultory leadership under Patrick Manning and his PNM party. A few expressed excitement about having a woman lead the country for the first time in history. Others thought that it was the UNC's turn to try their hand at governance after nearly 40 years of PNM hegemony. And many of my respondents were simply glad that Manning was gone. At the worst, a few comments bordered on outright indifference to the whole election ordeal, but none expressed any hostility toward Kamla (toward the UNC, certainly, but Kamla, at least at the time, was mostly safe from stinging criticism and scorn). The general mood at the time could be characterized as accommodating. Stalwart PNM supporters notwithstanding, the attitude of most Trinidadians sounded something like, "let's give her chance and see what she can do."

Just three years before Kamla's historic victory, Indo-Trinidadians were complaining bitterly of their poor performance in electoral politics, blaming their futility, in part, on Government's misuse of resources to garner votes³. Indo-Trinidadians declared that it was their turn to run the government and that if put in office they could be trusted to run the country more evenly and fairly than many of their Afro-Trinidadian predecessors had. Some Afro-Trinidadians fired back that because of their unwillingness

³ This included accusations of gerrymandering and "buying votes", involving new low-income houses being built in PNM strongholds, typically the urban areas around Port of Spain.

to participate in “Trini culture”, that is, to creolize, they could not be relied on to help anyone but themselves. A prototypical example of this kind of stereotype can be seen in a letter to the editor of *The Daily Express*, one of Trinidad’s three dailies, titled “Stroking the egos of Indo-Trinis”. The writer, Lynette Joseph, uses biting sarcasm to state that Indo-Trinidadians have no right to complain that they have not held government but for a short time as they have only themselves to blame. The letter is long, taking nearly four columns, but worth quoting at length as it touches on many of the problems I wish to address throughout this thesis.

This rushing to placate the egos of our Indo-Trinidadians is becoming somewhat boring. Why are we allowing the rest of the population to be taken on this “guilt trip”? What “discrimination”? What “inequality”? They know, we know, and the discerning visitor can see that the Indo-Trinibagonian (Trinidadian/Tobagonian) is very well financially and socially placed. There is no need to alert Amnesty International, the United Nations and other such agencies to oversee their remarkably comfortable “plight”. I don’t believe myself to be exaggerating. Discrimination for them really means no matter what they try politically, they are unable to win control of government. And they want us to believe this is our fault. Not theirs. I have noticed that, creeping insidiously into the media, reporting of the following (sic): “it is our time to be in government. Look how long the PNM has been there. It’s not fair that one political party should dominate the elections.” Again, whose fault is that? This is a silly reason to give for their non-performance at the polls. Politics is not a game of hop scotch. There is no “taking turns” embodied in the Constitution. The governing of Trinidad and Tobago remains elusive to the collective opposition as they have limited their strategies to merely “getting enough seats”, to defeat the PNM. That is taking a narrow view of what a sophisticated Trinidad and Tobago needs to make a mark on the First World as well as play a pivotal role in the Caricom⁴ states. There is a dire necessity that they remove themselves from their “cultural bubble”. You are not being asked to betray your religion and to forget Mother India. You are asked to become “unencumbered” of the feelings of inferiority. This is emancipation week. We are supposed to be celebrating our African heritage. Our Indo-brothers and sisters appear to still see themselves as (psychologically) indentured persons. This

⁴ Caricom is a contraction of Caribbean Community, a cooperative trade arrangement between participating Caribbean states born from the ashes of the failed federalist program of the 1950s and 60s that sought to create a unified economic collective between the former British colonies. Caricom currently has fifteen member states, modeled loosely on the European Union.

separation of thought is what prevents the voting public taking a chance to vote outside their usual boxes. (...) It is desirable that the collective opposition send a message of “racial inclusiveness”. They have barricaded and limited themselves. (Tuesday, July 28th, 2009)

The letter goes on, stating that accusations of inequality only suppress “upward mobility” of opposing groups and that this Emancipation week should be a time of collective celebration with “a clear heart.” The letter is one of the clearest distillations of a number of stereotypes plaguing what first Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago Eric Williams, in a fit over his failing attempts to forge a unifying nationalism, once termed “the recalcitrant minority” (Ryan 2009: 170-184; also Yelvington 1993: 13). The author of the letter, Lynette Joseph, understands Indo-Trinidadians’ problems at the polls not as stemming from entrenched racism but rather as a natural consequence of remaining “barricaded” inside a “cultural bubble.” Joseph obliquely collectivizes all Indo-Trinidadians as Hindus (roughly eighty percent are so) and assumes that their allegiance is to India and Hinduism first, and that cultural/political investment in Trinidad need not amount to betrayal. In an interesting bit of sleight of hand, Joseph takes the conservative imperial critique of former slave colonies as those still living with a “slavery mentality” and applies it to Indo-Trinidadians, claiming they still labor under a psychological illusion of being, “indentured persons.” Just as conservatives from the industrial powers lay blame for problems of economic development on the “slavery mentality” of the former labor colonies, so too does Joseph locate Indo-Trinidadians’ political woes in an indentured mentality. She does not clearly define what she means by this term, but alludes to the fact that Indo-Trinidadians still see themselves as repressed. That they see themselves as repressed is what accounts for their political failure, despite their success in business that offers them a “remarkably comfortable ‘plight.’” For Joseph, as for many

others in Trinidad, Indo-Trinidadians' struggles at the polls is a symptom not of racially divisive social and electoral politics inaugurated by the colonial regime lingering even after Independence in 1962, but rather by their purported reluctance to serve anybody but their own community. As we will see in later chapters, the "recalcitrant minority" has not only been active in social politics since the late 19th century and in electoral politics since the 1920s, they have become fully integrated into Trinidad's social fabric.

Though there is much more to be said about this letter, the final point I would like to make about it for now pertains to Joseph's concern about "a sophisticated" Trinidad and Tobago's potential to "make a mark on the First World." As we will see in later chapters, Joseph, perhaps unwittingly, shares a concern with making a mark on the First World, as she has it, with many of her "Indo-brothers and sisters." For the Hindu community I worked with for this project, a central concern of theirs is reshaping Trinidad's infamously relaxed party culture into a more disciplined one able to compete in the global economy with the northern metropolitan powers. The notion that Trinidad needs to project an aura of disciplined professionalism to the broader global community, and its subtextual implications that at present it is not doing so, forms a large of part of present nationalist discourse by certain members of both the Afro- and Indo-Trinidadian community.

Joseph's letter neatly captures many of the lingering tensions between Afro- and Indo-Trinidadians that emerged upon Indians' arrival in 1845. The long history of mutual suspicion between the two groups and the stereotypes they carry is clearly evident in the content and condescending tone of the letter. Anthropologists of Trinidadian ethnic relations and the country's varied micro-nationalisms have convincingly linked such

suspensions and essentialist racial discourse to governing technologies implemented through colonial hegemony (Khan 2005; Munasinghe 2003; on hegemony see Williams 1991). The policies and discourse that issued from the colonial office in Trinidad built a social structure of distance, mistrust, animosity, and intolerance. Relations between Afro- and Indo-Trinidadians, as many scholars have shown and as Joseph's letter indicates, are still marred by the discursive categories the imperialists left behind. Yet at the same time there are ruptures, cleavages, and disjunctures in the continuity and totality of imperial discursive forms. The anthropology of colonialism and its aftermath have effectively shown us how the vestiges of colonial history continue to inform race relations and petty nationalisms in post-colonial societies. However, Paul Rabinow has effectively, if controversially, argued that history is not the only and final determinant of contemporary social practice. Rabinow's recent work in what he calls the "anthropology of the contemporary" challenges ethnographers to explore the "micro-practices" of the everyday that subtly shift, rework, and re-interpret discursive formations (2008; 2003; see also Faubion and Marcus 2009). While Joseph's letter is a stark example of the tenacity of imperial categorical logics, it is also a lesson in their tenuousness. It is instructive that Joseph avoids the kinds of essentialist tropes one would expect from such a missive. Her discussion of Indo-Trinidadian patterns is almost exclusively couched in constructivist terms. That is, she recognizes, even if only implicitly, that those behavioral patterns are not fixed but rather entrenched path dependencies that can be "given up". Read in conjunction with Kamla Persad-Bissessar's uncontroversial, landslide victory (59 percent to Manning's 39), we can see shifts, or ruptures, or turns in social logics whose genesis lies less in entrenched historical patterns and more in the transnational flow of

imagination. My work hinges on the immediacy of these kinds of micro-practices and argues that global flows of ideas, representations, style, ideologies, knowledge categories, can shift, often quite rapidly and radically, local imaginative spaces and social logics.

Building on the work pioneered in the discourses of public culture (Appadurai 1993; Hannerz 1990) and cultural studies (Storey 2009; Hall 2007; Williams 2007), I focus on how the Kendra (re)imagines its future through the use of Hindu practice and in a rapidly changing local and global public culture. My work with a small community of Hindus in central Trinidad focuses on the way in which they imagine the future and the practices they create and implement in their teaching programs to realize that future. What I argue is that we need to jettison overdetermined categories like “nationalism”, in many cases, in favor of more nuanced analyses that take account of the creative processes at work in everyday micro-practices. The members of the community I work with, called the Hindu Prachar Kendra (or simply, the Kendra), are too consciously constructivist, too creative with reimagining tradition, too linked to global cultural flows to be unproblematically labeled as nationalists.

As a descriptor of ethnic behavior, particularly in regards to the politics of ethnic identity, nationalism is a problematic term because it generates its own kind of discursive hegemony. In other words, social scientists enamored of the term and its attendant assumption of primordialism, are too easily coerced into finding its signs rather than its dissolution, recreation, or re-imagination. As an interpretive category, nationalism fails to adequately address many of the other reasons certain groups, in this case diasporic Hindus of the West Indies, might seek to maintain certain traditional features, practices and forms. Furthermore, it may overlook the creative, sometimes subtle sometimes

radical, recreations of traditions for ends that may have little to nothing to do with identity maintenance. Throughout this thesis I will attempt to identify, document, describe, and analyze how the Kendra uses, re-interprets, and imagines Hindu practice not to maintain a distinct ethnic/cultural/religious identity but to fashion futures that compete in a radically changing global economy. Using Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) term, my work is the study of the invention of tradition, with the key difference being that I would add "conscious" to the phrase. The Hindus I work with are fully aware of their invention of tradition practices, thus there is no primordialist lid to blow off (see Handler 1989; Linnekin 1985). The Kendra re/creates Hindu practices as the needs of the community dictate, which is why the founder of it can casually say to me, "I prefer being Hindu in Trinidad than India."

Imagination, Contingency, and the Contemporary

Arjun Appadurai's landmark book *Modernity at Large* makes a compelling case for the radical shifts in social logics and imaginative spaces opened up by global media (1996; see also 1990). Expanding on Anderson's (1984) concept of nations as imagined communities, Appadurai urges ethnographers to consider the role of imagination in shaping cultural forms and the influence transnational flows of ideas through popular media have on imaginative processes. If anthropology is the study of "lived actualities", as he accurately phrases it, then the work of anthropologists is to challenge facile conclusions and sweeping generalizations that overlook those actualities (1996: 11). Influenced mightily by the cultural studies tradition that emerged in England in the

1950s, Appadurai draws our attention to the idiosyncratic processes inherently involved in reading the texts of popular media. He states that,

More consequential to our purposes is the fact that the imagination has now acquired a singular new power in social life. The imagination – expressed in dreams, songs, fantasies, myths, and stories – has always been part of the repertoire of every society, in some culturally organized way. But there is a peculiar new force to the imagination in social life today. More persons in more parts of the world *consider a wider set of possible lives* than they ever did before. (emphasis added 1996: 53)

As we will see in the following chapters, the Hindus of the Kendra shape their pedagogy and interpret their central text (the *Ramayana*) in light of their imagined future. That future is one that is unquestionably influenced by, responds to, and actively participates in, global and localized flows of imagination. The ability of social agents to “consider a wider set of possible lives” is evident in the cultural logics and interpretive practices of the Kendra’s leaders as they use ancient practices and texts in distinctly contemporary ways. But it would be a mistake to see their contemporary interpretation and use of Hindu traditions as merely tools by which to contend with modernity. Rather, their interpretive processes are also informed by futures imagined, in part, through representations in popular media. Put otherwise, the logics that underwrite Kendra pedagogy and practice are contingent on the Kendra leaders’ engagement with and interpretation of events, representations, and ideologies circulating in transnational and localized media. Thus, their interpretation of Hinduism and their practices of subject formation may be seen as an integral aspect of Trinidadian public culture.

Judith Butler’s rich exploration of the concept of contingency, coupled with her mobilization of Hegel’s understanding of the universal, helps us neatly capture the process by which imaginations, and thus local cultural logics, are continually

transformed. As chapters two and four deal more extensively with Butler's work, I will only briefly discuss here the importance of her treatment of universality and contingency and how these concepts inform my interpretive process.

If there is a core concept that can be said to bind nearly all of Judith Butler's work it is the notion of contingency, or looked at slightly differently, transformation, or even instability. What Butler is concerned to communicate are the contextual limitations of discourse and thus the instability of knowledge. Her reading of Hegel's articulation of universality rests on the assumption that subjects are repeatedly altered, if only slightly, by the phenomena they encounter. I share this assumption. If there is a universal, Butler wants to say, it is forever in the process of being re-imagined, or restaged, and is therefore unstable. In other words, if the universal has an essential quality, that quality is continual renewal, transformation, contingency. In her terms, "the knowing subject and the world are undone and redone by the act of knowledge" (2000: 20)⁵. She goes on to point out that "[knowledge] categories are shaped by the world [each individual] seeks to know, just as the world is not known without the prior action of those categories. And just as Hegel insists on revising several times his very definition of 'universality', so he makes plain that the categories by which the world becomes available to us are continually remade by the encounter with the world they facilitate" (2000: 20). The Kendra, I will propose, continually remakes "the categories by which the world becomes available", or even intelligible, in often very conscious, strategic ways.

⁵ Rejecting Eurocentric models of the universal, Martinican poet Aimé Césaire arrived at a similar conclusion stating, "I have a different idea of a universal. It is of a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particulars there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all" (cited in Kelly's Introduction to Césaire's play *A Tempest* 1992: xiii).

Butler's work on contingency and Hegelian universality combine well with Appadurai's thesis on imagination and Rabinow's concept of the contemporary, dealt with more fully below. Considered in conjunction, Appadurai's study of imagination and Butler's work on contingency demonstrate a variable process by which imaginations, and subsequently cultural/social logics, are re-imagined by the flows of ideas represented in popular texts. Put in a combination of Butler's and Appadurai's terms, the profusion of phenomena, in this case creative media, interpreted and later restaged by the subject, radically alters knowledge categories more rapidly than ever before⁶. The aim of my research is to identify, document, and analyze, to use Tobias Reese's triad (in Rabinow et al 2008: 58), the features of Kendra logic and practice that directly respond to and are influenced by popular media flows. The aspect of imagination I want to explore among this small community of Hindus is how they imagine their future and the means by which they attempt to realize that future through their instructional practices that work to shape subjectivities.

Operationalizing an Anthropology of the Imagination: Fieldwork Methods and Their Limitations

Putting the study of imagination, contingency, subjectivity, and the contemporary into operation requires attention to what Kristin Peterson (2009: 37-51) calls "phantom

⁶ On this point Appadurai adds a disclaimer that the "importance of media is not so much as direct sources of new images and scenarios for life possibilities but as semiotic diacritics of great power" (1996: 53). It is not altogether clear what he means by "semiotic diacritics of great power" (dialectics?), a disclaimer made even more baffling by the next paragraph which opens with an unequivocal claim that it *is* the procession of media through "cinema, television, and video technology" that energize both older media and the imagination.

epistemologies”, or lines of indirect evidence. Though more traditional ethnographic methods such as interviews and participant observation constituted a large part of my data collection techniques, more important were strategies that allowed me to read much of the subtext of Kendra and HSS practices and logics. Similar to Peterson, George Marcus states that “Fieldwork does not just consist in taking interviews. It consists just as much in attending to the unspoken” (in Rabinow et al 2008: 95). Because my work is not after the identification of “concrete wholes” such as nationalism, but rather seeks to understand the linkages between transnational flows of fantasy, myth, and ideology and local interpretations and imaginaries, traditional ethnographic methods offered less rich insight. Phrased in Weber’s terms, the object of analysis in my work is “singularities, not totalities” (Rabinow 2003: 43). Through informal conversations with teachers and parents, sitting in on conversations between teachers and parents or teachers and students, attending classes, decomposing, as Reese (in Rabinow et al 2008: 58) has it, the rumors and gossip and critiques of other groups and their strategies, I was able to collect data that drew out “lived actualities”. “Phantom epistemologies,” Peterson writes,

do not seek out parts in order to fit into a whole that is imagined to exist out there somewhere. Rumor, anecdote, stories, evasiveness, and not being able to ever know are their own sets of data and knowledge. They point us not in the direction of desired concreteness, as in “facts”, but rather offer an analytical opening to something just as fascinating and analytically provocative as a traditional sense of the empirical. (2009: 41)

That “something” that is just as fascinating and analytically provocative as traditional epistemologies is, for my project, insight into an imagined future of Trinidadian Hindus as it is shaped by connection with global flows of fantasy, ideology, mythology, and practice. Put in Rabinow’s terms, my work seeks to uncover “the contingencies of the present and their genealogical lines” as they emerge from and respond to contemporary

events, trends, and practices (2008: 55). The Kendra's strategies for shaping professional, disciplined, hard working, dutiful, and respectful children can be genealogically traced to Hindu practices and pedagogies that are centuries old. What my work attempts to accomplish here is a genealogy of these strategies understood as linkages with global and localized flows of public culture.

The Kendra is a small *mandir* (temple) and community center located in central Trinidad, just outside the bustling little city of Chaguanas. Raviji, the founder of the Kendra, built the mandir in the early 1980s after returning from ten years of study in India. The mandir, he says, was built with the community in mind, as a place for the instruction and promotion of Hindu worship, study, and practice. Since its founding in 1981, Raviji has adapted and innovated various programs to meet the needs not only of local Hindu communities but, equally as important, the needs of all of Trinidad. Throughout most of the year the Kendra operates primarily as a mandir, a meeting place for weekly *satsang* (worship service) or evening yoga sessions. During the summer, however, it becomes the site of the Bal Ramdilla Summer Vacation Camp where roughly 60 students ranging in age from 4 to 17 gather to study, practice, and ultimately perform, the ancient Hindu epic *Ramayana*. Though the Kendra is geographically rather isolated, set in a quiet rural area and surrounded by small farms, the mandir is well known for its many programs and celebrations held throughout the year. Mostly, however, the Kendra is known for its elaborate production of the *Ramayana*, a play adapted from the epic poem narrating the adventures of the god Rama as he attempts to regain his abducted wife from the destructive demon king Rawana and restore the *dharma* (Hindu morality) to earth. The play (*lila*, locally *leela*) is produced and performed in Hindu communities

throughout the world and by several others in Trinidad as well (Vertovec 2010). For the Kendra though, the play is more than another celebration to observe on the Hindu liturgical calendar, or simply offered as a local cultural attraction for tourists, as it is in Bali. The Ram Lila (creolized to Ramdila in Trinidad) is the centerpiece of the Kendra's pedagogy and the means by which they attempt to instill timeless Hindu values into their children. The Kendra's instructors, as I will describe later, instill these values not so much to maintain a distinctly Indian or Hindu identity, or to avoid creolizing or "mixing" as Khan (2004) has it. Rather, Kendra instructors, like Lynette Joseph, are deeply concerned about the future of Trinidad and its ability to compete in the cutthroat environment of modern global economics. On a more local level, they worry that their children will be swept into Trinidad's culture of gluttony and carelessness and will be left behind by more professional, disciplined, and competitive students. The sense of discipline, order, respect, and public leadership they attempt to promote in their students through the study and performance of the *Ramayana* is, I argue, less about nationalism and ethnic identity and more about effective competition in local and global politics and capitalism.

I visited the Kendra on and off for five years, living on their compound for part of a summer. During that time I observed and often participated in the many activities they do throughout the day. From the morning mantra ritual, called Prarthana, conducted in five militaristically straight lines, to the afternoon Ramdila performance practices, I observed, participated in and photographed the numerous activities and lectures of the Kendra. Every morning I stood in the teachers' line, reciting the Prarthana with my hands pressed against each other and elbows out facing the devasthan (shrine area), bowing in

obeisance to the devas (gods and goddesses). After the Prarthana, the classes began – one for the 5-7 year olds, taught by Judyji, one for the 8-10 year olds, taught by Meenaji, and the ‘*Ramayana* theory’ class for the 11-17 year olds, taught by Shruti. The interns, three seventeen year old young women, were given special instruction by Raviji on the *Ramayana* that included the study of Sanskrit and Awadhi, the language of the Tulsidas *Ramayana*. I sat in on every class several class numerous times and was even entrusted to teach Judyji’s 5-7 class and Meenaji’s 8-10 year olds. Though I cannot report tremendous success at classroom management in either case, I did learn a lot about the logic that underwrites the teaching practices of the Kendra. Perhaps more importantly, it was an honor of the highest order that teachers would call on me to take their classes when they were absent. It signaled a level of trust that upon first request took me by surprise. The benefits both to my fieldwork and, infinitely more importantly, to my relationship with the people who invited me into their community, are immeasurable. Here, however, I’ll deal with the former.

After a time (I cannot remember precisely when it happened), I ceased being that awkward guy taking notes on everything and became Aaronji, part of the teaching staff, albeit in a modified sense. Unquestionably I had the easiest job of the lot. Though I was treated, to some degree, as a teacher (the ‘ji’ at the end of names is a marker of respect, often reserved for teachers), I was not expected to discipline or order the children. I got to play their games with them, participate in acting practices with them (usually involving hastily improvised skits and much silliness), and occasionally teach their classes. The kids warmed to me quickly, which allowed me not only to understand in richer detail Kendra pedagogy, but also to get to know their parents and their motivations for sending

their children to the Kendra. Most of the parents grew comfortable with me as well, accustomed to seeing me as a fixture at the Kendra day in and day out for the duration of Bal Ramdila, and happily entertained my prying questions.

In the late afternoons, when the parents would turn up to retrieve their children, I would often be introduced to the parents by some of the students. In this way I got to know most of the parents, many of which shared their thoughts about the Kendra and their concerns and hopes for their children. Some of the discussions were formal interviews, others short conversations standing in the parking lot before they drove home. In most cases, however, the conversations were ongoing dialogues that lasted the duration of the Bal Ramdila Summer course. I got to know some of the parents quite well, particularly those who volunteered regularly at the Kendra. As with the teachers, a critical function of the Kendra for the parents is its ability to promote which instill discipline and diligence in their kids. Through observation, dialogue, participation in nearly all activities, teaching, interviews, and informal conversations (liming) I was able to discover patterns in the community's concerns that resulted in this thesis.

In many ways, the Kendra's strategies for shaping disciplined subjects are not wildly unique or unconventional. Like many other religious groups they use heroic, often selfless, mythical characters as models of orthodoxy and morality and, in contrast, villainous, typically greedy, gluttonous, and destructive characters as examples of spiritual corruption. The Kendra requires intensive study of sacred texts and the memorization of key passages. They expect the students to be orderly, respectful, courteous, deferent, and professional. Their students must follow all guidelines and apply themselves vigorously to all of the programs and lessons given throughout the day. In

short, they are expected to behave like the models of morality they study every day in the epic *Ramayana*.

In several other ways, however, the Kendra's strategies are entirely unique. Their strategies and their implementation of them are distinctly Trinidadian, revealing local logics and approaches to knowledge at work. Their interpretation of Hindu practice, scripture, and history are, in some cases, clearly shaped by their century and a half-long presence in a heavily creolized, post-colonial, New World state. Their concern with discipline, and Trinidad's perceived lack of it, permeates nearly aspect of Kendra pedagogy and discourse. And their techniques, or technologies (Foucault 1990; 2003; 1999), of subject formation reflect links with Trinidadian assemblages and recurring logics. The Kendra's heavy use of rote memorization, their insistence on order, and their adoration of rules (which, curiously, can change rather suddenly, or are enforced capriciously), reflect an interpretation and practice of Hinduism in part shaped by local cultural assemblages and logics, even as they attempt to influence those logics⁷.

A richer understanding of Kendra pedagogy and how it is received by its students could be realized through interviews and focused discussions with the children. Though I was around, worked with, and talked to the children on a daily basis, given the limitations of time and my concern to keep the thesis from sprawling, I never sought IRB approval to formally include the children in my study. Gaining insight into how the students perceive their futures and the ways in which the Kendra helps or possibly even hinders their

⁷ Neil Lazarus (1999) suggests that the British attempted to instill their love of law and order in their colonial subjects as much through games as any other educational medium, hence the widespread popularity of soccer and, more importantly, cricket, in the Commonwealth colonies (see pages 144-95).

efforts would be extremely instructive. Have the children imbibed the message of discipline as the teachers intended? In what ways have they interpreted Kendra lessons and the narrative arc of the *Ramayana*? Have they grown as anxious about their future as their elders have? How might the Kendra be preparing them for adulthood? By focusing only on the adults I gained a sense for the anxieties that animate Kendra programs and participation. However, what the study misses is how those anxieties and the programs attempted to allay them are interpreted and made sense by the students. Further studies will address this limitation.

Analysis of Data

Analysis of the Kendra's programs, discipline regime, and discourse hinges on linking these practices to global and localized flows of assemblages, understood as "a distinctive type of experimental matrix of heterogeneous elements, techniques, and concepts" (Rainbow 2003: 56). Rabinow identifies three types of catalytic historical-social events, all drawn from Foucault's work on discourse, that determine logical trajectories and provide the contours for normative processes. I will deal with just two of Rabinow's three events. Problematizations, he asserts, are points in history that present problems to be worked out over time and through logical and ethical practices. For example, the bourgeois revolution presented the problem of governance in a post-feudal, democratic, humanistic social environment. New strategies, technologies, and knowledges were required both to understand and address the historic shift. A problematization, in Foucault's terms, is a heterogeneous event that is a "transformation of an ensemble of difficulties into problems to which diverse solutions are proposed" (cited in Rabinow

2003: 19). In Rabinow's articulation, we can understand a problematization as "both a kind of historical and social situation – saturated with power relations...as well as a nexus of responses to that situation" (2003: 19). For my work, I understand the rise of neo-liberalism throughout the Reagan-Thatcher years of the 1980s as constituting a problematization, or a shift in historic-social relations that would, and do, have global implications. The radical shift inaugurated by the neo-liberal problematization is one of extreme competition (Chang 2008), of the profusion of transnational media reaching further into more people's lives, and of a more widespread longing for local realizations of the bourgeois revolution. My work does not seek to critically interrogate the neo-liberal problematization. Rather, I understand the historical shift as contingent and variously responded to, interpreted, and practiced. What I wish to do is describe and analyze practical events and lived actualities of the Kendra's members as they negotiate this contemporary-historical terrain. In other words, I trace the genealogy of many of the Kendra's programs and the structure of their pedagogy to the recent history of changes in late-capitalism.

The second event Rabinow identifies is, as I've already mentioned, an assemblage. Assemblages are related to problematizations as a congeries of techniques, practices, and concepts that are shorter lived and thus more contemporary than problematizations. Applied to my research, assemblages are the concepts and techniques of late capitalism whose origins are Euro-American (more American, however, than European) but which are formed (and normed) locally. In more concrete terms, the assemblages I identify and analyze here are the practices, logics, and concepts in currency at the Kendra as they emerge from and respond to their global flows. The

Kendra's intensive focus on discipline as a means of effective competition in a changing local and global economic-social order is the most salient example of how I understand and apply assemblages as an interpretive category. The concept of discipline is one that emerges from neo-liberal discourse as a moral attribute necessary for success. Kendra instructors have imbibed this discourse and created from it techniques, technologies, practices, ethics, and moral norms (assemblages) that localize and respond to contemporary needs of discipline.

The few studies on Hinduism in Trinidad have either been studies of the religious practices of that community and their similarities or differences with Hindu practice in other diasporic communities (Vertovec 1992; 2001; 2010) or with India (Klass 1988), or it has been subsumed under projects investigating instances of ethnic nationalism (Khan 2004; Munasinghe 2005). These studies all start from the assumption that historical processes left residues that continue to inform discourse, ideology, knowledge, and practice. While my work seeks in no way to minimize the social effects of colonialism, I agree with Rabinow that given the rate of global cultural change we cannot assume that history is the primary determinant of contemporary norms and forms of societies (2008). Rapid shifts in technology, communication, aesthetics, and values must certainly have a strong and thus analyzable effect on local cultures. My study seeks to move away from pure historical determinism and toward analyses of contemporary cultural norms and forms responding to, accommodating, resisting, the global flow of cultural, political, and economic logics. That is, this is an attempt to write what Rabinow would term "an anthropology of the actual, or an anthropology of the 'near future and recent past'" (2003: 55). Surprisingly, there has yet to emerge an analytical ethnography of the ways in

which Hindus in Trinidad, or in other diasporic communities, interpret their texts and traditions to understand and negotiate the rapidly changing modern world. My research aims to expand discourse of Hindu diaspora studies beyond the historical forces that lend them their present shape and into how interpretations of texts, practices, rituals, and folklore are influenced by their position in a global matrix of rapidly changing norms and forms. Necessarily then my work also challenges paradigmatic field methods situating historical events and discourse as the primary determinants of contemporary practice. What I hope to demonstrate is the interconnected and influential relation between religion and certain features of global culture, making Hindu subject formation "visible [as] a singularity at places where there is a temptation to invoke a historical constant, an immediate anthropological trait, or an obviousness which imposes itself uniformly on all" (Foucault, cited in Rabinow 2003: 41). I do not wish to argue that legacies of colonialism are irrelevant. However, I do wish to challenge the practice of viewing colonialism as a "historical constant" and to assert that (post)modern transnational flows of ideas, fantasies, practices, texts, mythologies (Barthes 1972), and ideologies exert an observable and analyzable effect on religious subject creation, textual interpretation, and means of negotiating the contemporary.

The term 'discipline' lies at the crux of my research. Through the numerous uses and articulations of this term one may read the urgent concerns of a community competing at both micro- and macro-political and economic scales. Reverberating out from the concept of discipline are assemblages of ideas, values, concerns, and aspirations that form linkages with interpretations of the past, with present local and international trends, and with contemporary trans-national ideologies. Polyvalent and layered with

complexity, discipline operates as the avenue through which to analyze how key social-political-economic concerns give shape to textual and performative interpretation and the creation of Hindu subjectivities. The way in which instructors of the Baal Ramdilla course interpret and apply study and performance of the Ramayana is informed in turn by interpretations of past and contemporary events as they stand in relation to the Hindu community. For example, a common Indo-Trinidadian interpretation of the indenture program, which brought Indians to the West Indies from 1838 to 1917 to work the sugar cane and cocoa fields, paradoxically situates Indians as resistant to colonial hegemony yet also equal with imperial cultures (Khan 2004; Munasinghe 2001; Niranjana 2006). Similar complex and often ambivalent, paradoxical relationships with Trinidadian and global mass culture persist in which resistance, accommodation, re-creation, share space in the community imaginary. It is important then to situate Trinidadian Hinduism as a creole Hinduism, as a uniquely Caribbean complex, and to analyze its local, regional, and global linkages (cf. Klass 1988). Just as Afro-Caribbean creole communities forged creative new cultural forms from fragments of African, European, and Indigenous societies (Knight 1990; Harris 1998; Benitez-Rojo 1998), so too have Hindu Indo-Trinidadians forged communities from the fragments of diverse religious practices from throughout India within an already creolized milieu (Samaroo 2006; 1985 Selvon 2006). In sum, my work seeks to decompose the constituent parts of Trinidadian Hindu subject creation and to document and analyze them in a local and transnational context.

If anthropology is at the point of reconsidering 'givens' both interpretive and methodological, then it is important I believe to reconsider and rigorously interrogate the given of nationalism as a cultural form. Nationalism an overdetermined category whose

mobilization forestalls identification, documentation, and analysis of other cultural patterns, constructs, and reactions to global shifts in imagination and conceptualization of life rapidly circulating in modernized societies. This study hinges on imagination as studied through interpretation, that is interpretation as an act of imagination that has social-political implications as well as theoretical ones that challenge the discursive hegemony of nationalism as an interpretive category. As with Rabinow my focus is on everyday politics and power dynamics that profoundly shape worldviews, subjectivities, and the larger abstract cultural forms with which we are in constant negotiation (this is justification for influence in work from cultural studies). Efforts of the Trinidadian Hindu community extend beyond mere identity politics and cultural preservationism, efforts I will argue that warrant analysis of cultural contingency, performativity, and interpretation that require agency based theoretical models of the kind emerging out of cultural studies and the work of post-structuralist thinkers such as Butler, Marcus, Rabinow, and Appadurai. The multiple lines of indigenous interpretation I seek to identify, document, and analyze – their interpretation of Trinidadian history and the Hindu place and role in it; their interpretation of contemporary Trinidadian and global forms of popular culture; and their interpretation of Hindu scripture and lore – is best served by post-structuralist and cultural studies analyses for their emphasis on and recognition of the complexity of individual and group interpretive practices and the numerous contingencies that color such a process.

Since Brackette Williams' richly documented landmark study of ethnic nationalism in Guyana (1991), Gramscian notions of hegemony have dominated ethnic studies in the Caribbean (Khan 2004, Munasinghe 2001; Niranjana 2006). Gramsci's

model has been influential in studies of colonial and post-colonial studies of ethnic nationalism, as well as in cultural studies, for its attendance to the subtleties of social and political power dynamics. Gramsci's articulation of power sought to move Marxism toward analyses of the participatory nature of hegemony, highlighting, even if through a lens of ideology coercion, the (limited) agency of the working classes. His recognition that all members of each class and trade are intellectuals in their own right and from which emerges leaders capable of distilling that class or interest group's needs, what he calls the "organic intellectual", underscores articulations of power, or hegemony in his terms, that situate the masses as active cultural agents (2009: 78; 1971). However, like most other Marxists, his model rests on the mobilization of ideology as a coercive technology that blinds the working classes to their own repression (see Horkheimer and Adorno 1998; Barthes 1972; Althusser 1995; Jameson 1999). Though a Gramscian like Laclau (1985; 2000) might take exception to my reading of Gramsci's staging of power, his model fails to capture the agile, contingent, and ultimately unstable process of interpretation that all subjects experience. Butler's careful attendance to the subjective experience of hegemony and thus the universal I believe draws the relation between subject and form in sharper relief. Her attendance to critical questions of the contingency of knowledge and identity (2006; 2009) and her treatment of belonging and translation in political and ontological states (2007) helps me analytically address the micro-practices of a community contending with global modernity.

My work here, then, is an attempt to write an ethnography "that is not so resolutely localizing" (Appadurai 1996: 55). In other words, how might we locate the Trinidadian Hindu community as more than shaped by and responding to local contexts

but rather, given migration patterns and the globalization of entertainment and news media, how they are situated as critical consumers and active agents within a broader matrix of symbolic, ideological, material processes? This question is especially relevant to Trinidad in light of its massively mobile population (Scher 2003) and extreme influence by American popular culture (hence the influence in my work of certain cultural studies scholars). Appadurai states that,

There is, of course, much to be said for the local, the particular, and the contingent, which have always been the forte of ethnographic writing as its best. But where lives are being imagined in and through realisms that must be in one way or another official or large scale in their inspiration, then the ethnographer needs to find new ways to represent the links between the imagination and the social life. (1996: 55)

This project can thus be viewed as an attempt to represent links between Trinidadian Hindu imagination as it responds to global shifts, and the social life they seek to shape in and through a localized globality.

Culture, Cultural, and Cultural Logics: A Brief Definition of Terms

As an interpretive category, culture has become a largely meaningless concept, an empty signifier. In its attempt to capture nearly every aspect of a community's social life, it ends up capturing nothing. In other words, if it is everything it also nothing. I cast my lot with certain contemporary thinkers who find the term problematic because of its inevitable opacity, its ambitious claim to totality. Appadurai seeks a way around the problem by understanding culture to mean "the process of naturalizing a subset of differences that have been mobilized to articulate group identity" (1996: 15). For Appadurai then, culture is a processual event involving the movement and mobilization of diverse elements

toward the evolving formation of group identity. Lest he be labeled a primordialist cloaked in different cloth, Appadurai is quick to point out that his definition rests on the assumption that culture/ethnic groups do not draw on an “existing repertoire of emotions” that are moved into a larger arena of ethnic politics, as the older models suppose, but rather imaginatively draw on larger social forms, such as cricket, that are then “inscribed on the body through a variety of practices of increasingly smaller scale” (1996: 14). His ambiguous terminology notwithstanding (by “body” is he referring to the social or individual body?), if I understand him correctly Appadurai is attempting to attend to the micro-practices in constant motion among a group unified, to some degree, by the logics that guide that process. Appadurai’s understanding of what culture is, or perhaps more accurately does, moves us further from the tedious inventory of attributes and deeper into the realm of process, in his case, the process of identity formation and mobilization.

In his groundbreaking essay “Notes on Deconstructing the ‘Popular’” (2007a [1981]), Stuart Hall arrives at a similar conclusion, viewing culture as a process that involves the struggle to resist dominant culture hegemony and the inevitable containment, or acceptance, of certain dominant culture forms. Like Appadurai, Hall is critical of cultural models that dismiss the creative work of culture groups (in Hall’s case class groups) as they consume dominant cultural forms. “Everything changes”, he reminds us, “- not just a shift in the relations of forces but a reconstitution of the terrain of political struggle itself” (2007: 65). In his interrogation of theoretical models that attempt to explain the workings of popular culture, Hall is suspicious of those that assert the presence of an authentic working class culture tainted by the vapid creations of a dominant culture industry (see, for example, Horkheimer and Adorno 1998). Such a

view, he holds, fails to do justice to the creative, sometimes resistant, sometimes accommodating, acts of popular culture consumption. Rather than viewing culture as a space dominated by one group over another, we should view it instead as a process in constant motion “in the complex lines of resistance and acceptance, refusal and capitulation, which makes the field of culture a sort of constant battlefield. A battlefield where no once-for-all victories are obtained but where there are always strategic positions to be won and lost” (2007: 67). Like Appadurai, Hall urges us to attend to the small acts of imagination that continually reshape cultural form and expression.

In a four-way conversation about the history and direction of anthropology, Paul Rabinow, George Marcus, James Faubion and Tobias Reese (2008) agree that the term culture is problematic and prefer to jettison it in favor of the more process oriented and active term ‘cultural’. Like Appadurai, the group finds that whereas culture tends to signify bounded totalities, fixed structures, or organized systems, cultural opens the field of ethnographic inquiry to classic Malinowskian projects such as idiosyncratic logics and patterns while recognizing the active movement of local forms and norms (2008: 106-110). Tobias Reese states the problem neatly by pointing out that we “[are] not studying islands of culture. Instead, in my case anyway, we’re studying emergent rationalities or technologies” (2008: 107). George Marcus agrees, stating that though anthropologists rely on the concept of culture, its conceptual terrain must be re-imagined in order to identify and analyze different processes and sets of problems. “Conceptual substitutes for older ideas of culture – based on geographical referents, totalities, holism, tied to forms of life – called for in work in environments of fragmentation and partialities like hybridity don’t serve us very well because they were designed for research problems

related to identity, the centrality of which I think all of us here think we should be trying to move away from” (2008: 108).

The term ‘culture’, just as the thing the it attempts to identify, is dynamic, fluid, contingent, processual, at times ineffable, and riddled with nuance. Substituting the concept of the cultural for the more static term culture moves us further from descriptions of bounded totalities, monolithic systems, or, in my case, hegemonic structures, and more toward the identification and analysis of everyday processes that demonstrate localized linkages with globalized flows of knowledge and practice. My work with a small community of Trinidadian Hindus underscored for me their link with contemporary flows of globalized cultural practice and the ways in which they conceptualize and interpret certain features from those flows. The instructors of the Kendra, as well as the parents that send their children there, imagine for themselves and their community a future within, and even through, this rapidly changing global process. By conceptualizing the logics and practices of this community as cultural, rather than representing a bounded group shaped by historical hegemonic structures, I hope to analyze the imaginative micro-practices evident in their programs that show signs of linkages with broader global processes. In this context then, the concept of cultural logics helps us identify imaginative processes that respond to larger, more transnational movements.

CHAPTER II

RAM LILA: PERFORMANCE, PERFORMATIVITY, PRACTICE

Discipline is a political anatomy of detail.

~ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

One of the reason we don't have leaders all over the place is we afraid to get up in front of people.

~ Raviji, to class after dance performance practice

The Ram Lila (Leela in Trinidad) is a very specific type of performance. It is not exactly a musical, not exactly an ordinary play, and not operatic. It is a bit of all those, and something else besides. On the surface, the play is the story of Rama's defeat of immorality (adharma) as he restores Raja Dasharatra's kingdom to order and rescues his wife Sita from the troublesome demon-god Rawana. The play, however, is also exemplary and didactic. It is intended to communicate something beyond the quotidian social politics that consume our day-to-day lives, instead articulating the ideal moral and behavioral models God expects us to follow. Ram Lila is literally translated "the play of God", which Shrutiji tells me is a double entendre; it is a play demonstrating an important event of God's participation in human life (that is, Vishnu's incarnation as Rama in Ayodhya) as well as how God plays, or acts, in our lives. The cosmological play is what lends the Lila performance what one observer described to Shrutiji as a "mythic" quality. Every movement and gesture are to communicate incomprehensible stretches of space

and time as God, in the form of the super human Rama, and his companions wage an epic battle against the destructive forces of greed, hatred, and selfishness.

The students of the Kendra must learn how to perform the mythic qualities of the epic through countless drills and improvisations each day. On some occasions they move around the room together, stretching their arms gracefully as their feet do a skip-walk to move them through time and space in epic fashion. They learn to vocalize forcefully, making certain to face the audience while gesturing dramatically. They practice moving around the stage in a way that “takes up space”, as Raviji puts it, in order to fill the stage and create a sense of motion and progress. Or they might rehearse being stationary, as a tree, but in an expressive fashion that captures the importance of *Ramayana* theater. As Walter Benjamin has aptly illustrated in his essay *What is Epic Theater?*, the purpose of epic productions is not to elicit empathy from the audience but more importantly to elicit astonishment “at the circumstances under which [the characters] function” (1968: 150). But even more essential is that the production is not primarily for the benefit of the audience. Benjamin’s claim that epic, didactic theater is “in every instance...meant for the actors as much for the spectators” could not be more accurate in this case (1968: 152). The Kendra does not perform the Ram Leela in front of large crowds of tourists dazzled by the elaborate costumes and impressive displays of pyrotechnics as they do in Bali. Nor do they even perform for large local audiences. The audience is modest and appreciative of their work, but certainly not the centerpiece of the Leela. The production is for the actors who must live the astonishing circumstances of Rama’s life. As Victor Turner (1990) sees it, playing out crises in the abstract of theatrical performance, what he calls “life-crisis rituals”, allows a society’s members to confront and resolve more easily

difficult situations that arise in the real world. Performing the crisis of Rama and Sita is therefore an opportunity to rehearse in the safe space of the Kendra life difficulties the students are certain to confront as they mature and take on “the milling, teeming” (Turner 1990: 11) social world by themselves.

As with the line formation drills, the music lessons, lunch protocol, and the myriad other ritualized practices at the Kendra, the kids are challenged to perform each drill to perfection. But it is not only Raviji who will critique them and demand excellence, they are also judged by their peers. After the post-lunch rest period students gather in the central meeting room under Raviji’s guidance to practice theater techniques. Operating in small groups of about five to seven, the students are either given a short scene from the *Ramayana* to condense, rehearse, then perform for their audience of peers, or are asked to design a skit of their choosing for improvisational theater. After each performance the students reconvene in a circle and one by one stand up and offer their critiques or praise of the performances, concluded by Raviji’s observations and advice. In characteristic fashion, Raviji playfully mocks students who offer vague and meaningless feedback. “It was *gooooood*,” he says, drawing out the word “good” in exaggerated mimicry. “It was very *gooooood*,” he repeats, eliciting laughter. “It was very, very, *gooooood*,” to even more laughter.

Raviji will not accept shyness as an excuse for failing to speak boldly before the large group. Students that mutter, mumble, or speak to the floor are corrected, then asked to repeat themselves until they can be heard clearly by everyone. Likewise the students must speak creatively, articulately, and accurately, avoiding clichés involving overused adjectives such as ‘good’, ‘nice’, or ‘interesting’. Students that manage to speak to

acceptable standards are lauded with praise, held up as an example of ideal vocal performance. Students that fail are often playfully mocked then encouraged to continue working at public performance.

For Raviji, performing *Ramayana* is less about showcasing Hinduism's legacy of literary achievements and more about the performativity of confidence in a Hindu way. My phrasing here is important because I want it to be clear that Raviji is not dictating a specific brand of Hinduism, hence the reason I state that performativity of confidence is done in a Hindu way rather than the performativity of Hinduness. The distinction may be slight, but important because the phrasing "in a Hindu way" more accurately captures Raviji's approach, implicitly suggesting that his method is one means among many of encouraging confidence through religious practice and public performance. Central to the Kendra's project is building the confidence of its students, and the *Ramayana* happens to be the means by which they attempt to accomplish that goal. To state that the performance of the Lila is incidental is not to say that it is not important, but rather that its importance lies not so much in its place in the Hindu canon but in its role as medium through which to shape strong, confident individuals. Again it needs to be clear that my phrasing here is intentional. I use the open-ended 'individuals' rather than 'Hindus' or 'Indo-Trinidadians' because, although most participants are Indian (by my count 98 percent), not all of the students are or must be Hindu. Yet Raviji is clear to me, and often to his students, that the problem he sees with Indo-Trinidadians is that they are afraid to speak out in public settings, that they avoid confrontation that would right an injustice, and that they prefer silence to outspokenness. On the one hand then, the Kendra's project is one that seeks to promote Hindu traditions and texts within their diasporic context. On

the other hand, their project is also recognized explicitly as a creolized form whose purpose is the promotion of values and practices that will help the community succeed in a competitive, capitalist milieu.

This chapter then will explore the relationship between performance, as a form of ritualized theater, and performativity, that is, the embodied daily performance of specific sets of community values, logics, and biases about appropriate behavioral practice. There is a strong and perceptible link, I will argue, between the *Ramayana* performance that Kendra students rehearse throughout the summer months and the performativity, or practice, as Goffman puts it, of self (1973). Practicing for the *Ramayana* is also a means of practicing the self as Kendra teachers believe it should be performed and practiced. It is within this rehearsal of the Lila and the self that we most clearly see local technologies of subject creation.

Performing the Hindu Self

On the first day of the Bal Ramdila Vacation Course Shrutiji asks the students to sit after the Prarthana as she covers her expectations for appropriate behavior. Usually the first expectation is that students wear appropriate attire, which means wearing “Indian clothes”. After a short lecture on the inappropriateness of “western clothes like jeans and t-shirts”, she put the question of correct dress to the class. “Why do we wear Indian clothes?” A girl of about seven answered, “Because we’re in a mandir”. “Yes, that’s true,” Shrutiji replied, “but why else?” “Because we’re Indians,” offered another girl. “To show respect,” suggested a high school boy. “Those are all good reasons, but what is the most important reason we wear Indian clothes?” The class was silent, clearly stumped by

the question. Shrutiji smiled her wide smile as if to say “Isn’t it obvious?” then reminded them that they wear Indian clothes “because it demonstrates Hinduness. It shows that we are Hindus.” That the obvious had so readily eluded us as we sat cross-legged in our neat lines brought a collective nod to the group. Before concluding the dress portion of her lecture Shrutiji reminded the students that appropriate clothing was a requirement of the Kendra and that Indian clothes meet that requirement. Evidently, the requirement is a soft one, because that day I counted a total of 54 students, 36 of whom were wearing what Shrutiji would consider Indian clothes (roughly 67 percent). Over the next few weeks of the course that number hardly fluctuated, and I noticed that certain kids (almost always boys) seldom wore Indian attire. For that summer, the lecture was never repeated and I never heard Shrutiji bring it up again in any other context.

Important to any theatrical performance are the costumes that signify the personalities and class position of its characters. Costumes in theatrical performances function as semiotic signs that communicate to the audience something about the character donning them. We also learn about personality and class types by the attire of each character in a performance. In everyday life there is little difference between how theatrical characters are delineated through dress and how ordinary people delineate themselves through their choice of costumes. Shrutiji’s insistence on Indian dress at the Kendra is one clear way of delineating members of the Kendra specifically, and of the Hindu Indo-Trinidadian community more broadly, from those of other communities. But more importantly, it signals not merely an identity marker as Indian or even as Hindu, but rather a level of dedication to the principles embodied and expressed through Hindu practice. The donning of Indian attire is tantamount to a declaration of commitment to a

set of principles and guidelines that are distinct from those that operate in the broader social/cultural setting of Trinidadian life. That is, Kendra leaders, as with those of related Hindu organizations, view their values and aspirations as different from many of the popular forms circulating in public culture. As I have indicated elsewhere, this perceived difference in values and priorities is complicated by a paradoxical longing to participate more fully in the shaping of public imaginary spaces. Thus, the wearing of Hindu clothes should be seen as more than cultural nationalism, but also as an attempt to legitimize an alternative praxis that seeks space at the banquet of forms, worldviews, and styles offered through public imaginary spaces.

The performativity of Hinduness through the semiotically rich medium of costume is one of many ways in which the public performance of Hinduness reifies the category 'Hindu' as legitimate. In other words, the performance of Hinduness through attention to dress is one of several technologies of subjectivity community leaders use to promote their Hindu-derived values. As Judith Butler has proposed, the stabilization of social categories, in her case gendered ones, is dependent upon their routine performance in narrowly prescribed, meticulously circumscribed ways (2007). She states that "acts, gestures, enactments" of gender categories "are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (2008: 185, emphasis in original). The reality of gender categories, which we might easily extend to any socially inscribed category such as race, ethnicity, class, religion, are constituted through the numerous acts, gestures, enactments naturalized around and through them. Of course, there important differences between gender and religious categories, perhaps the most

central being that the gender binary female/male and its discursive corollaries femininity/masculinity are naturalized to a hegemonic degree such that the “integrity” of the subject’ is called into question when performance of the category fails to match its prescribed behaviors (2008: 185). A Hindu’s integrity as a Hindu is not likely to be called into question if she is not wearing a sari or he is not wearing a kurta. Certainly, that integrity may be suspect if certain other expected behaviors of Hindu religiosity are not apparent, but because few non-Hindus would assert that they know what it means to be Hindu, such integrity may safely remain intact. This is not true of gender, where cultural consensus about gender categories is typically high. That distinction notwithstanding, Butler’s performativity model is helpful for the light it sheds on practices, rationalities, and acts, that produce and re-inscribe social categories. The apparently simple act of wearing Indian clothes inscribes behavioral codes and helps define the parameters of the indigenously interpreted category ‘Hindu’.

The emphasis on Indian clothes also belies an unmistakable element of essentialism. A good many Hindus, even in India, do not routinely wear Indian clothes. The globalization of western fashions, particularly of slacks and jeans for both men and women, is as noticeable in India as it is in Trinidad. Wearing Indian clothes is no more a marker of piety for Hindus than wearing a cross is for Catholics. But within the symbolic economy established at the Kendra, and I suspect at several other ideologically and theologically aligned Hindu community centers, wearing Indian clothes not only outwardly signals to others that one is Hindu but, more importantly, acculturates the children into moving and behaving in the Hindu way as Kendra leaders interpret that category. In other words, it is a way of wearing Hinduness that embodies Kendra

ideology. As a practice of embodied knowledge, wearing Hinduness through traditional Indian clothes encourages Kendra students to appear and self-identify as Hindu, the inverse of which is *not* to appear western or American. The attempt of uniformity at the Kendra is an attempt to embody the disciplinary values viewed as inherent in Hinduism and lacking in certain features of European and American popular culture. According to Kendra logic, the baggy jeans and lazily sagging t-shirts popular among the youth could not possibly help promote the discipline necessary to succeed in a competitive economy.

Other forms of embodied practice involve eating, resting, and speaking in an appropriately Hindu way. Lunch, for example, is an important ritual of embodied Hinduness. The first ringing of the large brass hand bell during *Ramayana* instruction signals to students and teachers that ten minutes remain before lunch. The anxiousness of the students is palpable, but they remain admirably composed until the ringing of the next bell, communicating it is time to clean up and prepare for lunch. Chairs are stacked, tables folded and tucked away, and hands washed before everyone gathers in an orderly fashion to line up for lunch outside under the cover of a large corrugated tin roof. No rowdiness, pushing, arguing or even loud talk is permitted during line or at lunch, and I never witnessed any such behavior to see what the consequences would be in the case of their violation. Quiet talking is permitted during line up and at lunch, except for Thursdays, which, save for the lunchtime mantra, is a day of eating in absolute silence. After the children and teachers have collected their food, served by the volunteer cooks, they sit down at a long grey painted table, waving flies from their food and waiting for one of the older students, interns, or teachers to come around to pour a spoonful of water into their upturned hands that will bless the food after the mantra. When the mantra is

complete and Raviji, the guru, has taken his first mouthful, the students may begin eating. Conspicuously absent from the place setting is flatware of any kind. Before the students is a plate with a modest portion of Indian and creole foods and a cup of either water or characteristically over-sweetened juice. On the first day of camp one of the teachers, usually Shrutiji but possibly Meenaji, must remind students that eating is to be done with hands, which she kindly demonstrates for the new kids. To remind the students how to eat properly Shrutiji says, “We eat with our...” which cues the kids to respond in unison, “right hand”.

During the first few weeks I spent at the Kendra, awkwardly unsure of where I should sit, I decided to eat with the students. They seemed intrigued by the novelty and happily shared information of all kinds about appropriate customs at the Kendra while politely correcting my misdeeds. Sitting with different kids every day, I often asked how many of them routinely ate with their hands at home. They typically laughed when I asked that and reported, except for one student, that they only eat with their hands at the Kendra. Like the loose requirement to wear Indian attire, eating with the right hand underscores how Indian customs are recreated in Trinidad in a quest for authenticity. The quest for authenticity animates much of Kendra pedagogy and demonstrates how embodied Hinduness is a central feature of their symbolic economy. By learning to eat with their hands Kendra students are performing Hinduness in ways they would not outside of the Kendra. It seemed to matter little that nearly everyone in India – Christians, Muslims, Jains, and others – eats with their right hand. What matters, rather, is that students embody the values associated with India and participate in an authentic ritual of perceived Hinduness. The lunchtime rituals then serve, like the wearing of traditional

Indian clothes, as a recreative event that draws the students closer to their Indian heritage, which also, by extension, draws them closer to Hinduness.

After lunch the students are provided a short period of rest. Having taken their plates and cups to the kitchen and washed their hands, they retrieve their yoga mats (usually a beach towel) and spread them carefully on the floor to prepare a personal resting spot. Raviji reminds the students as they lie down that they are to do so on their left sides. When I asked Raviji why the left side he gave me a puzzled look and replied, “I don’t know. I never thought to ask.”

Performativity and Language

The recitation of texts, usually from the *Ramayana* but sometimes from other texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, is one of the most important single practices of the Bal Ramdilla summer course. The Prarthana, as I have already described, is memorized by children as young six years old. And Shrutiji is very particular about the pronunciation of key words, a particularity not necessarily spared because of age. But the Prarthana is one of many memorization and recitation rituals encountered throughout the day. Following the Prarthana and the morning announcements and reminders students retrieved their yoga mats to do chanting (praise hymns) and sun salutations (*surya namaskar*) with Damanandaji. Sitting in a meditative pose, the students chanted the eight line surya namaskar in Sanskrit four times. Like Shrutiji, Damanandaji would correct mispronounced words or phrases at the end of the mantra and ask students to repeat it with him in unison until he was satisfied with their effort.

On several occasions we gathered in groups of about eight to ten to practice lines from the *Ramayana* in Awadhi. These sessions seemed to follow no predictable time schedule but were routine enough that students knew what to expect when Shrutiji ordered them. Sitting in a circle on the floor of the main hall, students would practice repeating the phrases with the help of Shrutiji or one of the three interns. Already quite familiar with Shrutiji's teaching style, I typically sat with one of the interns to see how she approached the lesson and dealt with pronunciation problems. I sat with the same group for several days in a row, curious to see the progress of the students who ranged in age from nine to thirteen (students showing signs of maturity and acuity, such as nine year old Vishala, are often bumped up from the younger classes into the older ones). The intern would start the lesson by reciting a line from a verse (*caupai*) of the *Ramayana* as it is supposed to be read in Awadhi or Sanskrit. She would then start from the first word, having the students repeat after her in unison. After several repetitions we would move, always clockwise, around the circle and one by one repeat the word the intern pronounced for us, "atulitabaladdhamam" careful to emphasize every third syllable in order to preserve the correct cadence. Students of Shrutiji, the interns are as particular about pronunciation of the terms as their teacher, if a bit more forgiving. Students that failed to aspirate the *dha* or nasalize the final syllable *m*, had to repeat the term until they got it right. Many students struggle with the aspirations, a flaw of minor consternation for Shrutiji who sees the true apprehension of Hindu philosophy linked to the ability to pronounce Sanskrit, Awadhi, and Hindi correctly. Indeed, it was during a training session for Hindi educational materials by an Indian currently living in Boston that I began to understand why pronunciation is so important for Kendra teachers, particularly Shrutiji.

Subashji makes his living selling educational materials for Hindi language instruction. His proud invention is a plastic refrigerator magnet set of Devanagari (Hindi alphabet) that he sells to places like the Kendra that want to begin teaching Hindi. Subashji had offered to come to the Kendra one afternoon to demonstrate his teaching program for Kendra instructors who had begun of late considering more serious and sustained Hindi language lessons for their students. A short, rotund man with slicked back balding hair and a waddling gait, Subashji claimed that his program was ideally suited for teaching children of all ages, but because of the inclusion of “toys”, it was especially effective with the younger audiences¹. Subashji began the lesson by teaching us syllables and phrases in Hindi, showing us pictures of the Devanagari in bright letters from his accompanying booklet. The lesson, however, quickly turned into much more than language instruction. He punctuated the language and pronunciation instruction with history, culture, religious, and even science lessons, all revolving around the holistic completeness of the Hindu complex. “Speaking Hindi”, he claimed, “creates healthy enzymes in the mouth.” He also stated that Devanagari is the mother of all Indo-European languages, which he would remind the world of by creating a Devanagari theme park where patrons could play and learn Hindi at the same time. Subashji also spent considerable time comparing Indian thought and culture systems to the West, which invariably came out on the bottom. He also took the time to remind us that other language programs, particularly Berlitz and Rosetta Stone, were inferior for their failure to focus on pronunciation. “As Indians, as Hindus, you know the importance of proper

¹ The toys, as it turns out, were simply his refrigerator magnets, which he said could be arranged to spell Hindi words. I was mystified by his approach, struggling to understand how his system of constant repetitions differed from any of the programs he disparaged.

pronunciation.” Shrutiji concurred, stating that the philosophy of Hinduism is intimately linked with language.

A one man lesson in Hindu nationalism, Subashji provided an insightful contrast with the Kendra’s instructors. Subashji had no trouble linking Hindi to Hinduism, though many millions of non-Hindus in India speak Hindi. He routinely invoked Hindu intellectual advances, situating India as the birthplace of various philosophical, mathematic, scientific, linguistic, literary, and spiritual discoveries. Subashji’s India as Mother Culture narrative, not just for Hindus but many other culture groups besides, recalls for me the heliocentric theories of Diffusionist anthropology that situated Egypt as the provenience of all major cultural forms (see Boas’s critique of diffusionism in 2001). Similar to the Diffusionists, Subashji sees India as a kind of cultural axis mundi out of which radiates the practices of many other culture groups. Like Shrutiji, he also expressed irritation with the British, and the West in general, for failing to credit India for its own advances. “The British come to India, take everything, and don’t give credit,” he said, smiling and nodding as if to add, “but we all know the truth, don’t we?” Despite a few areas of overlapping concern, such as the protection of intellectual property rights of India from the pilfering West, it was clearly evident that Subashji was after something very different than his Trinidadian counterparts. The thread that bound Subashji’s narratives and efforts was the promotion of Hinduism as a logic system equal with anything produced in the West, or anywhere else. Further, not only is Hinduism’s operative logic equal to any other system, it is also in many cases the unacknowledged progenitor of those systems. When I first came to the Kendra I expected to hear more narratives like Subashji’s, and without question I did from some parents. But Subashji’s

visit threw in stark relief for me the differences between what the Kendra, and its affiliated groups such as the HSS, are doing compared with what Hindu nationalists in and from India are doing. The Kendra is not simply promoting Hinduism purely for its own sake, as if to finally prove that Hinduism can not only measure up to other systems, but in fact is the measure of them itself. I think I would be overstating my case to say that such strands are non-existent in Kendra narratives and pedagogy. But their focus is clearly more centered around success and the use of Hindu texts and practices as a means of achieving that success than it is with pushing an extremist nationalist agenda.

For Kendra instructors, the promotion of Hinduism for its own sake must compete against concerns emerging from their historical context in Trinidad. As an indentured community, sequestered on plantations in the hinterlands and struggling to adapt to new customs, Indo-Trinidadians' concern with competition is a long-standing one. The luxury of promoting Hinduism for its own sake or of fighting ideological battles were projects the indentured laborers, peasant and working class Indo-Trinidadians could ill-afford. Basic needs such as proper nutrition, functioning sanitation systems in the villages (Brereton 1985), education (Laurence 1985), domestic violence problems (Trotman 1986), and access to the legal machinery (Samaroo 1985) trumped the more bourgeois concerns of theology and epistemology. The post-Indenture peasant and working classes were absorbed with a more concrete set of problems, chief among them the agitation for better pay and working conditions (Haraksingh 2006; for a similar study on Guyanese resistance and agitation see Ramnarine 2006). As the Indian community became settled in Trinidad and more and more Indians chose Trinidad as their permanent homes, access to mechanisms of class mobility became increasingly salient. If the new Indo-Trinidadian

community, that is, the second generation and later Indians, were to make Trinidad their home, they would have to do more than adapt their customs and language to the dominant Creole logic. They would need to compete in the economic and political arenas for resources to improve their lives and allow their children opportunities they would never have.

When I asked Raviji about this aspect of Indo-Trinidadian history, he confirmed its salience, reporting that even as a child, most of his friends and extended kin from his village were illiterate as late as the 1940s, many having hardly stepped foot in a school. Census statistics confirm his memory. By 1971 a full 26 percent of Indo-Trinidadians had had no education at all, compared with 2.5 percent for Afro-Trinidadians, .2 percent for whites, and 4.9 percent for all other groups (Dookeran 1985). Almost 80 percent of Trinidadian schools at this time were urban, meaning severe educational neglect and class perpetuation in the former plantation communities. It was the slow pace of development and attendance to rural Indo-Trinidadians' needs that prompted Raviji, among many others, to found a mandir that tended both to the religious instruction of the community as well as, and perhaps more importantly, to its educational needs. For Raviji, however, the focus is not traditional education, which he leaves in the hands of trained instructors in the formal education system. Rather, Raviji wants to address the means of self-actualization long denied rural Indo-Trinidadians by an urban centric, bourgeois dominated political system. Practicing and performing *Ramayana* is tantamount to practicing and performing life. Voicing one's critique of another's performance amidst a sea of watching eyes, standing up and reciting *Ramayana* in Awadhi before one's peers and teachers, performing a skit devised in mere minutes in front of classmates and

friends, all contribute, according to Raviji's logic, to building a generation of Indo-Trinidadians unafraid to compete in an uncertain economic setting and to speak up for their community in a tensely contested political setting. Viewed in this light, the performativity of Hinduism observed in various Kendra rituals such as the textual recitations, eating rituals, resting posture, and the wearing of Indian clothes is at the same time a quest for authenticity and an attempt to promote and instill a set of disciplinary values and practices that will lead to success in the social politics of competition. The question of whether the Kendra is striving for authentic Hinduism is worth exploring in relation to performance as it helps illuminate the motivating logics of their programs.

Constructing Authentic Creole Hinduism

What holds true for many anthropological observations of social constructivism, and in some instances in the areas of ethnic nationalism (Handler 1998; 1997; Linnekin 1990) and historical re/creation societies, holds true in most ways for the Kendra.

Anthropologists interrogating the politics of authenticity have noted that the quest for it is an elusive one. In the case of ethnic nationalisms, authenticity, Handler shows, is typically a question of who is defining its parameters and their ideological and political agendas. Truth and accuracy as descriptors of cultural traits are as ephemeral as the thing they attempt to describe. Put another way, how does one identify a true or accurate cultural trait within a system that is itself in constant motion? How is true culture preserved or re/created and, more to the point, what features, practices, traditions are considered true and who decides what those things are? In the case of Handler's work, as with other social constructivists, cultural preservation is often in the hands of those with

the greatest social and political capital, thus, what is preserved is typically biased toward a normative bourgeois culture. The assumption among those preserving, or attempting to preserve, true culture is that the culture they wish to preserve is the true culture. In other words, the ethnic nationalists who attempt to (re)construct true national culture do not see their work as such. Preservation or maintenance are their keywords, not constructivism or creation. It is here that the Kendra, and its main architect, Raviji, stand apart from other ethnic nationalists attempting to preserve culture. Raviji is an admitted constructivist, speaking routinely in very sophisticated and self-conscious ways about the culture he is attempting to fashion. His work, he often says, is more about creative response to community needs, and less about preserving Hindu culture. Raviji's candidness about his project and his awareness of it as a kind of pastiche, points up the need for an anthropology of contemporary micro-shifts in cultural practice. The notion that community leaders often act as architects of a social system infused with their ideology is one no longer wielded by academics who use it to cleverly debunk false prophets of cultural authenticity. In distinction to many of the conservative Hindu societies he worked with, Raviji is well aware that his project is one of bricolage, that he is cobbling together a culture from various sources to meet local needs. Yet at the same time, he requires students to eat with their right hands, rest on their left sides, memorize Sanskrit, and perform puja correctly. In short, he wants authentic Hindu practice in his mandir. What more anthropology needs to explore, and what I wish to examine here, is how groups like the Kendra negotiate a longing for authenticity while also consciously constructing traditions. The question I will explore here is, how is the Kendra able to negotiate the quest for authenticity while admitting to social constructivism?

Observers of Hinduism in Trinidad have noted among its members a certain longing for authenticity (Niranjana 2006). The strict policing of appropriate Hindu behavior throughout the Bal Ramdila course, from clothing to speaking styles, illustrates not only many Hindu leaders' concern with competition and success but also a longing for preserving authentic Hindu forms. At the same time that Raviji can state that he is more interested in cultivating creativity and promoting empowerment among the children in his community than preserving an unadulterated Hinduism, two of the Kendra's head teachers have studied extensively in India. Both are fluent in Hindi, one also in Sanskrit, and both have had trainings on *Ramayana* performance. Afternoon raga lessons, the proposed introduction of Hindi lessons, morning yoga drills (dreaded by most of the students), eating with the hands, the recitations, and numerous other small rituals indicate more to me than a self-actualization and empowerment program. Though the logic of the program was distinctly Creole enough to prevent me from labeling them Hindu nationalists, the performativity rituals did carry a longing for an authentic recreation of Indian Hinduism. Put another way, there is something more at work in Kendra programs than community enrichment programs but at the same time, something less than unqualified nationalism. If the Kendra's brand of diasporic Hinduism is not a nationalistic endeavor in preservationism and self-promotion, then what is it? As with any practice inspired by numerous external and subjective logics, their praxis defies easy categorization. From my vantage, what I see at work in Kendra efforts is what I have been calling 'creole authenticity'.

I have already discussed in great detail why I do not believe that many of the Hindu communities in Trinidad, but particularly the Kendra, are accurately classified as

nationalists, the principle reason being that the architect of the Kendra's many programs and its subsidiaries proudly declares that he is not a preservationist and freely interprets features from the vast Hindu corpus of literature, ritual practice, and tradition as he needs. But we must also recognize that the creole authenticity of Trinidadian Hinduism is an attempt to maintain the integrity of Hinduism while negotiating a non-Hindu social and political context within which rigid authenticity is not only impossible, but undesirable. The Kendra's hybridized traditions are practical constructions of Hindu forms that are responses to and negotiations of creole Caribbeanism.

In one conversation Raviji told me that he prefers being a Hindu in Trinidad over being a Hindu in India. When I expressed surprise he said, waving his hand in emphasis, "I am much happier being a Hindu here than India. This is much better." When I asked what the difference was he said that the freedom to invent practice and play with established forms was not only liberating but allowed him to shape Hinduism to fit Trinidad's unique needs. It also occurred to me that there is no Hindu authority in Trinidad that will call any particular group's interpretation or practice into question. Fascinated by Raviji's creative approach to Hinduism, I brought the issue up often, curious if others felt the same way. Not surprisingly, those who had not been to India tended to romanticize it in ways those who have experienced it do not. Anecdotally, it also seemed to me that the Kendra's most dedicated participants and parents who had not been to India also tended to be the most rigid in their interpretation of Hindu practice. Of the roughly twenty parents I spoke with only a few had been to India, and one was from India. They, and the three main teachers of the Kendra who had also been to India, were aware that Kendra practice took some interpretive liberties with the more conservative

Vedic traditions that dominate much of Hinduism in northern India. Though I didn't think to ask about it at the time, my impression is that the variety of Hindu forms evident in India, let alone in the numerous diasporic communities, must have reminded the parents and teachers who traveled to India that interpretive monopolies do not and can not exist. It was instructive for me that the parents who had not been to India saw it is the birthplace of Hinduism rather than Hinduisms. Looked at from a different angle, the experience of diverse practices evident in India allows for the freedom to re-imagine practice in Trinidad. Of course, this freedom operates within certain boundaries. Those boundaries are the delimiting lines of authenticity, beyond which practice would cease to be strictly Hindu. Speaking more generally, we could ask who defines those boundaries and decides what is still authentic Hindu practice and what is too creolized to meet the criteria of authenticity? Given the enormity of solving that question, I will stick only to briefly exploring this problem as it pertains to the Kendra and how they go about fashioning an authentic creole Hinduism.

As with many other transnations, Hindu communities in Trinidad must contend with the maintenance of indigenous practice in a new and different social-political context (Scher 2004). The process of preserving certain customs and discarding others is, above all, contingent, contested, and often idiosyncratic. What features are kept and which are let go often has to do with those community members appointed (by themselves or by others) with preserving the nation, or the imagined community, in its new home. Community leadership then is often a key component of cultural preservation among many transnations. Despite his claims of free innovation, Kendra ritual performance and practice under Raviji's guidance does fall within broadly accepted

standards of Hindu interpretation. I said as much to Raviji one day over lunch. He replied that his work as a Hindu did fall within an interpretive range popular among specific schools of thought. Namely, his work is influenced by the more creative approaches employed by groups like the RSS and the Chin Maya Mission, but ultimately beholden to neither. He freely admitted that he borrowed ideas from various interpretive traditions as well as crafting a few of his own, forging an eclectic practice in the process. This should not alarm anyone, he said, given that changing times and contexts require sacrificing some traditions and shaping new ones. He offered the Arya Samaj, in India a strictly Vedic group espousing a monotheistic theology (see Chapter I), as an example. “They have had to back off from their position a bit. Even they do *Ramayana* here.” It was surprising to hear that, yet at the same time expected. The *Ramayana* looms large in Hindu-Trinidadian public culture. Its position as sacred text and symbolic history of the Hindu Indo-Trinidadian community makes it impossible to disregard.

The folk oriented approach to Hindu practice gained a legitimate voice in Tulsidas’s *Ramacaritamanasa*. Though widespread and openly practiced throughout India, folk Hinduism relied heavily on the Puranic texts and the folklore they inspired through their often lurid tales of the devas and devis for inspiration and practice. Tulsidas’s *Ramayana* refashioned an ancient and well-revered text into a more accessible and thus public document. Though the elite protested it would debase accepted practice and distract people from the more important Vedic texts, their antagonism did little to slow its popularity, especially among the lower castes and classes who saw their beliefs mirrored in the new *Ramayana*. It was from this community that the indenture recruiters, the infamous arkatis, would draw for labor on new world plantations. Trinidad’s Hindus

were a part of this class, bringing with them their folk practice and their folk hero, Baba Tulsidas. As Trinidad's Indian community mushroomed throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Hindu missionaries arrived hoping to gain legitimacy for their interpretive schools by establishing traditions in the diaspora that would follow those in the Motherland. The Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha, the Chin Maya Mission, the Arya Samaj, and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh all established programs, schools, and mandirs in Trinidad, none of which strictly adhere to the founding principles and practices of the original group. The Maha Sabha is widely regarded as the most conservative Hindu community in Trinidad, and its president, the outspoken Sat Marahaj, is often mistaken as the spokesman for Hindu Trinidad, no small source of consternation for many Kendra participants. Yet despite its conservatism, the Maha Sabha, like nearly all Hindu communities in Trinidad, emphasizes bakhti practice to such a degree that the creolizing effect is unmistakable.

Vertovec's (2010; 2001) fine distinction between the types of Hinduism commonly practiced in India and those that were transported to the New World is an important one and lends meaningful insight into both how the creole religious process unfolded and how the quest for authenticity is still informed to some degree by the folk traditions that arrived in the mid-19th century. Resisting overdetermined models that split Hindu practice into either Great (priestly) or Little (folk) traditions, Vertovec urges scholars of Hinduism, either in India or in diaspora, to move analyses of and debates about Hindu communities beyond the folk/priestly binary. Vertovec's use of his terms 'official' and 'popular' (2010) to distinguish between the types of traditions imported to the New World from India notwithstanding, I agree with his insistence that we focus on

the “transformations” within Hindu communities and the processes by which they adapt practice to suit rapidly changing contexts (2001: 636). In the case of Trinidad, the diversity of practices, almost entirely folk, or popular practices, imported throughout indenture, not to mention the vast diversity of Indian languages, led, ultimately and somewhat ironically, to the establishment of Trinidad’s own interpretation of a Great tradition. Vertovec’s (2001) observations of remnants of folk practice in the 1980s holds true to my own contemporary observations. Though vestiges of the folk practices remain, most visible in my work in certain forms of divination (esp. Hindu astrology) and animal sacrifice at Kali pujas, the main current of Hindu development in Trinidad has been an increasingly philosophical iteration inching toward a homogenous orthoprax. Though post-Vedic texts such as the *Ramayana*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and many of the *Puranas*, remain in broad currency throughout the many programs and communities in Trinidad, the move toward homogeneity favors certain practices such as satsangh (devotional service, or reading), pujas, yagnas (or yajnas, sacrifice or offering rituals), and melas (festivals). In other words, Trinidadian Hinduism is less about the development of a hegemonic orthodox and more about trending toward an orthoprax, that is, a more common set of religious practices.

In light of this trend toward forging Hindu practice in the shape of a mostly communal form, I suggest that the authenticity the Kendra is striving for is one that is in line with Trinidadian Hinduism, or a creole Hinduism. The model by which the Kendra and other Hindu communities in Trinidad largely conform is a locally and dialectically shaped model whose transformation is determined from various sources and in varying degrees. For example, theological shifts in Hinduism stemming from movements and

groups within India typically have a minor, if not negligible impact on Trinidadian Hinduism. I would further argue that the more radical the interpretation, whether from the extreme right as it is articulated in Hindu nationalist discourse, or the extreme left, stemming from liberal responses to the religious nationalists by Marxist theorists in the Bengal tradition (Chatterjee 1993: 22-8), have virtually no impact on Trinidadian expressions of Hinduism. Anecdotally I would add that given the popularity of Bollywood films among Indo-Trinidadians, it is more likely that popular uses and representations of Hindu iconography and interpretation paraded in popular media have a greater influence on Trinidadian Hinduism than many of the theological schools do.

To be clear, I am not asserting that Hinduism in Trinidad conforms to one monolithic model. Rather, certain features, practices and interpretations of Hinduism in broad currency in India either do not appear in Trinidad (extreme religious nationalism, caste, Brahmanic control) or do so in a creolized fashion. In short, local changes in the social/political landscape as well as global ideologies and discourse shape the contours of Trinidadian Hinduism to a more radical and measurable degree than the theological evolutions and revolutions emerging from India. Thus, the quest for authenticity for many Trinidadian Hindus is not necessarily one that demands exact replications of Hindu traditions and forms from India (cf. Handler et al). Yet neither is authenticity a question of matching practice with an indigenously fashioned form. Rather, authenticity, particularly as it manifests at the Kendra, is an amalgam of Indian-derived Hindu tradition maintenance coupled with an openly subjective interpretation that exists in a dialectic with local public culture and in negotiated interpretation of global discursive forms and popular media. Raviji's creation of a musical style borrowing from Indian

traditions but responding to local events and practices is an ideal example of the performance and performativity of an authentic Trinidadian Hinduism.

Pichakaaree: The Invention of Tradition

Calypso stands as one of Trinidad's greatest contributions to global music traditions. The trademark Afro-jazz horns backgrounding the witty poet excoriating local officials and popular figures, or satirizing features of Trinidadian public culture² lend calypso its distinctive Caribbean sound. Calypso, however, broaches more than political and social commentary, stirring controversy for its rehearsal of racial stereotypes (typically of Indo-Trinidadians) and often veering into ribald and racy terrain eroticizing Indo-Trinidadian women (Niranjana 2006: 146-150). Might Sparrow's "Marahjin" series of calypsos infamously covered his adoration of Indian women with sexually explicit images and innuendos. Mesmerized by the beauty of an Indian woman, he sings to her:

When I see you in your sari or your orhni (head cloth)
I am captivated by your innovative beauty

² I have in mind here, as just one of countless examples, The Mighty Composer's ironically educational tune "Child Training". Linking violent and other forms of antisocial behavior with nonsense talk parents use with their children, The Mighty Composer reminds his listeners that "A child depends on his parents, to teach him some common sense/But when parents talk so much nonsense, he only learns disobedience/They make the child too much pity, from the time he a young baby/And when he grow a little, and sat around the house/This is how they does talk to he, 'Who bad? Doo doo. Sooga pyaah. Mommy nice, aiy? What you vant?'" With the exception of a few Calypsonians such as David Rudder and The Mighty Chalkdust (Hollis Liverpool) to name a few, Calypsos rely on playful satire to communicate social and political problems that need attention. Calypso shares with Reggae the treatment of social and political critique accompanied by upbeat music. However, Calypso generally lacks the gravitas of Reggae, whose themes of oppression, imperialism, and brutality are broached in characteristically parodic fashion by Calypsonians. The tradition of satire and parody can also be seen in the *mas* (masquerade) outfits of many traditional Carnival characters (Scher 2004).

Chorus:

Marahjin, marahjin, oh my sweet dulahin (bride)

Saucy marahjin, sexy marahjin, racy marahjin, all right

O dulahin, o dulahin, hear the sweet music playing

I want to hold you, I want to rock you

I want to jam you, jam you, jam you, jam tonight. (cited in Niranjana 2006: 146)

Mighty Sparrow's longing for an Indian woman and rhapsodic poetry of her enticing beauty comprise a longstanding tradition within calypso of essentialist treatments of Indo-Trinidadians. Representations of Indians, Niranjana (2006: 131) points out, began in earnest in the 1930s and assumed two main forms: songs that ridiculed Indians for their 'peculiar' customs, food, and clothes (a variation on this theme is the expression of envy at the savvy Indian's economic prowess), and songs that eroticized Indian women. Though calypso was born in the late 19th century, fused mostly from African poetic traditions and rhythms and European instrumentation, and despite the arrival of Indians in 1845, calypsos about Indians only emerged after they began moving into urban areas and they established themselves as entrepreneurs. Indian calypsos became a popular theme among calypsonians and their audiences, alternately eliciting laughter for their use of satire or lust for their lurid depictions of East Indian women. Implicit in the Indian women calypsos is an articulation of normative masculinity (in this case Afro-Trinidadian masculinity counterposed against the purportedly less viral Indo-Trinidadian masculinity) and an idealized femininity, embodied by the docile, devoted, yet alluring Indian woman (Niranjana 131-140).

Calypso has been and remains an almost exclusively Afro-Trinidadian cultural production. Indo-Trinidadians have contributed substantially to Trinidadian musics, mostly by way of Soca (said to be Indian influenced calypso, or ‘soul calypso’), Chutney (Indian music played on the plantations and in the rural areas), and Chutney Soca (Indian influenced dance music). However, the limited participation in calypso notwithstanding, there has not been an Indo-Trinidadian musical answer to the bawdy, often racy, and heavily lyric driven tradition inaugurated by calypso in Trinidad. Raviji sought to correct this omission with the creation of a style he dubbed ‘pichakaaree’. Indo-Trinidadians often expressed their outrage and irritation with the way they had been represented in calypsos, but few responses were ever in kind. Most were in print, found in the op-ed sections of one of the dailies. “Calypsonians have been writing about Indians for many years”, Raviji tells me, “some of it very critical material. Pichakaaree is a response to that tradition and an opportunity to strike back.”

The name *pichakaaree*, Raviji says, is taken from a brass hand pump used to squirt red dye during the Paghwa (also Holi in India) spring festival when participants cover each other in powder and liquid dyes of bright colors. The dye imprints its signature on the surface it is projected onto, leaving a noticeable stain that speaks to the presence of the participant. Likewise, pichakaaree was created with the intention of imprinting a Hindu Indo-Trinidadian stamp on local public culture. The metaphor speaks not only to Indo-Trinidadians’ desire to be heard and make a mark in a public imaginative space dominated by Afro-Trinidadian art forms such as pan, calypso, soca, and rapso, but also to a longing to critique representations of Indo-Trinidadians in currency within that popular space. Like calypso, pichakaaree uses satire, parody, and

sardonic wit to articulate social-political grievances and skewer public officials and characters perceived as overly eccentric, out of touch, or corrupt³. But more commonly pichakaaree operates as a mechanism of social critique, highlighting patterns of behavior and trends perceived to be developmentally disruptive. For example, Meenaji wrote a pichakaaree popular among Hindus in the Chaguanas area called “Digital Baby”. The song, backed by traditional Indian instruments but set to a somewhat calypso beat, laments our digital age where children are overly plugged in to technology and thus distracted from self-development. As Meenaji described the song to me⁴, it was an attempt to shed light on the distractions technology offers young generations coming of age in a time when civic and moral virtues are in decline. Like calypso, pichakaaree is an attempt to use popular spaces to communicate perceived social problems, however, it is also a response to calypso, an opportunity to fight back against representations of Indo-Trinidadians in the Afro-Trinidadian public imaginary. As I will cover in the next section, ideal models of behavior are essential to Kendra pedagogy, thus, the eroticized or

³ In June and July of 2007, former Prime Minister Basdeo Panday, then head of the UNC, took to wearing a red beret as a form of protest against Patrick Manning and his PNM party. Panday said he would not take the beret off until the PNM acknowledged his grievance, which was never quite clear to me or any other Trinidadians I spoke to. At other times, he claimed to wear it not as a form of protest but to prepare for war against the PNM in the approaching elections. He wore the beret for over two months, making reference to it in his many speeches, which were increasingly bitter and incoherent. At the annual political calypso competition held in the soccer stadium just outside of Port of Spain’s Woodbrook neighborhood, Panday’s beret was the object of many calypsonians’ ridicule, most of whom were, unsurprisingly, PNM supporters.

⁴ Sadly, I never got the lyrics to the song, despite my requests that bordered in badgering. Neither did she ever bring in the CD where the song was recorded. At the time, and I suspect this may still be the case, pichakaree was not available on commercial formats. Pichakaree is a live experience, recorded on mobile equipment at performances. Since the pichakaree was never furnished and I couldn’t go out and buy my own copy, I base my descriptions on the ones provided by Meenaji, composer of Digital Baby, and Raviji, creator of the art form.

demonized representations of Indians in calypso are imperative to counter. In a sense then, pichakaaree is part of a battle taking place in the public arena of the imaginary over the ideal Indo-Trinidadian.

Acting the Ideal: Ramayana Characters as Moral Guides

Part of the Kendra's self-appointed task is to wage an ever-vigilant battle against the morally slack tendencies of common culture. Standing in the entryway of the mandir talking to one of the kids, I overheard Shrutiji sternly correct two boys using street language. One boy had mistakenly referred to the other as "dude", to which Shrutiji responded, "Leave that at home. Bring your Hindu behavior here." The use of the common term "dude" clearly signaled to Shrutiji a lapse into the common cultural forms that "disturb the mind". It brought the profane into the sacred, polluting the pure space of discipline, focus, and moral effort with everyday carelessness⁵. The speech and action rectification then are important means of counteracting the spiritually and mentally disturbing forces of the dominant culture. Shrutiji's insistence on maintaining a strict boundary between purity and pollution by policing the attitudes, language, clothing styles, and behavior of the students signals to them not only a proper code of conduct, a code any institution may have, but more so a way of life and approach to self and others that is superior to the lazy habits of common culture. Perhaps the most effective and often mobilized tool in the Kendra toolkit is the use of *Ramayana* characters as role models (for the upright ones such as Rama and Sita) and as exemplars of destruction (for the

⁵ Though Shrutiji is not the only instructor waging the battle against common culture, she is unquestionably the most vigilant about it.

wayward ones like Rawana and the Rakshasas). What the instructors hope to inspire in the children is *darshan*, or seeing. By studying the characters, in this case the good ones, students learn the ideal attributes that lead to success. By performing those characters they embody those essential attributes of success. Performing *Ramayana* characters (see Figure 1), whether the good ones or the destructive ones, allows students to *see*, in a lived and thus experiential and embodied way, the consequences of wrong behavior and attitude on the one hand, and the rewards of hard work and mental and moral discipline on the other.



Figure 1. Practicing Ramayana

Invoking the appropriate practices of the ancients, Shrutiji informed her class that today's children have lost proper moral guides and imitate the wrong people doing bad things. "In olden times," she said, "children played games imitating adults (as we do at the Kendra now) who behaved appropriately. Now there is a lot of violence, and we play shooting each other. Ram Leela teaches you to follow good behavior." As an example she

offered the story of Raja Dasharatha (Rama's earthly father) giving gifts to others and the gods when his children were born. The Raja's act of giving, *dān*, demonstrated his gratitude for the birth of his healthy children and thus set a good moral example for his community. As Shrutiji liked to remind her students, "It is your responsibility to set trends of generosity and kindness" as Raja Dasharatha did.

To learn darshan then, involves more than seeing that the *Ramayana*'s dharmic characters behave correctly and thus achieve success as a natural result. Rather, the students must see in a deeper, more ontologically reorienting way. Put another way, they must experience the virtue of the gods themselves in order to embody their values, similar to the way Vodou practitioners of Haiti do not perform rituals simply to see God, or merely to talk about God, but rather to *become* God (Desmangles 1992: 4; Deren 1970: 217; Métraux 1972: 83). Though the motivation is of course different, what I find compelling about both Hindu Trinidadian *Ramayana* performance and Vodou practice is the embodiment of the gods as a means of changing one's life, typically for the better. For the Kendra's students, performing the gods is certainly much different than manifesting the *lwes* (spirits) for Vodouisants. However, the idea is for them to fully embrace the attributes of the character they are performing, whether mortal or god, commoner or king, rishi (saint) or laborer. In this sense, they take on and thus live, in mythic time and space, behaviors with natural rewards and consequences (Turner 1990). As the character sketches below demonstrate, the interpretation of each character's moral traits embodies both a somewhat traditional post-Vedic Sanatanist view as well as one compatible with Trinidadian iterations of modernity. For example, as the character sketch shows, Sita, wife of Rama, is described in ways that emphasize Trinidadian

understandings of gender relations, thus, the adjective dutiful, a trait often emphasized in Hindu discourse from India, never appeared. Rupali, a fourteen year old student in her third year at the Kendra, volunteered to draw a grid (Figure 2), labeled on the top, on the board as other students voiced descriptors of Sita.

Physical Aspects	Emotional Aspects	Intellectual Aspects
slim, fair, graceful, long hair, large eyes	kind, humble, calm, loyal, generous, gentle, concerned about others, strong, modest	wise, good judgment, intelligent, followed dharma

Figure 2. Character Sketch of Sita

During the afternoon performance practices, students would then act out the scenes discussed in the lecture period, trying to express in their performances the traits described either in Shrutiji's discussion or collaboratively outlined by the class. Raviji's direction guided the students while peer feedback communicated whether the performance was effective or needing attention in key areas. The important thing for the instructors is that the students fully embrace the traits for which each character is known. In the case of revered characters, they must emulate those traits both in performance of the Leela and performatively in life. A student playing Sita must convincingly express humility, loyalty, wisdom, and intelligence. In keeping with Trinidad's less overt patriarchy and with the Kendra's emphasis on personal success, ambition, and independence, the actors role-playing Sita must be strong yet modest and smart yet righteous (dharmic). In short, students must embody idealized Hindu values interpreted from the *Ramayana* through a distinctly Trinidadian colored lens.

Shrutiji's concern that today's children are not growing up with proper role models and, in fact, are encouraged through popular media to cultivate antisocial behaviors, combines interestingly with Raviji's concerns that Indo-Trinidadians are too docile when it comes to standing up for themselves and their communities' needs. Between the two, who exert the most influence on Kendra pedagogy, an environment of strict discipline combines with guided, creative public expression intended to promote strong public speakers. Raviji and Shrutiji both encourage bold, well-articulated, even precise public speech, but for different reasons. Raviji sees docility endemic in the Indo-Trinidadian community and hopes that a performance program that requires continual public performance will create a generation of Hindu Indo-Trinidadians unafraid to speak up against injustices and for the needs of their community. Shrutiji, on the other hand, sees moral decay in the young generations and hopes to rectify, or at least mitigate, its effects in the Hindu community. I would like briefly to address these two motivations in the next sections to draw out the importance they have on the Kendra's pedagogical environment and the way in which these concerns animate performance practices.

Discipline and Performance: The Role of Precision in Subject Creation

To steup someone in Trinidad is to simultaneously express your indifference toward her while also insulting her. Naipaul illustrates the popularity of teeth sucking in nearly all of his Trinidadian novels and his non-fiction classic *The Middle Passage*. The steup is a popular form of protest, a non-verbal cue expressing dissatisfaction or irritation. When well-timed, it articulates in a seemingly small gesture one's callous disregard for another. If the inhaled tooth suck expresses indifference the exhaled steup through pursed lips

expresses incredulity, particularly at someone else's audacity or stupidity. Despite its widespread popularity, there are certain contexts in which steupin' is its own act of audacity. It would be rare to see anyone using the steup in a professional setting, especially an educational one. Nonetheless, because it is a non-verbalized communication and thus offers some protection to the user who can hide behind its apparent ambiguity, unlike one could with an obvious insult, it does make appearances between superiors and subordinates.

When Shrutiiji was steuped by one of her 14 year old high school students, Vinaya, it seemed as though time stood still. I had never seen anyone display such a reckless attitude toward Shrutiiji. Though I suspect plenty of students have entertained the thought of steupin' her because of her relentless pursuit of perfection in nearly all matters that many find tedious, none have been bold enough, as far as I have seen, to ever do it. During the event I sat in stunned silence, looking at Vinaya then at Shrutiiji, waiting for Shrutiiji's wrath to fall. To my surprise, it never did. Shrutiiji simply turned on her heels and herded the other children to lunch. After the students had gone at the end of the day I asked Shrutiiji about it. "She's done it to me before," she casually stated, sounding resigned to her waywardness. "She's very stubborn," she went on, "and has problems with authority. The child has no discipline. She's done this to me for a long time now." It is precisely this kind of disrespect, particularly for elders, that Shrutiiji finds problematic in today's generation. The disrespect today's children show their elders is one sign among many for Kendra instructors that humanity is in a moral tailspin and in need of regimentation to rectify the problem before it is too late.

As I have elaborated in other sections and earlier in this chapter, the primary means of promoting discipline for Kendra instructors, especially for Shrutiji, is through exactitude. The precise pronunciation of Hindi, Awadhi, and Sanskrit is for Shrutiji a pedagogical method that inspires attention to detail, promotes a healthy work ethic, and instills moral values that guide children to do and say things in the right way. The children spend countless hours reciting texts in myriad situations. The day begins and ends with a recitation of the Prarthana. During each of the classes, the teachers ask the students to recite sections of the *Ramayana*, the younger ones often do so in English, and the older students will do so in Awadhi, Hindi, or Sanskrit. The three oldest students, all in their late teens, sit alone with Raviji, studying *Ramayana* scripture and learning Awadhi concurrently. The interns, as they are called, often assist the younger children in the small group sessions where they sit in circles of about eight to ten students memorizing *Ramayana* verses in Awadhi. The students are given several sheets of paper on which typed verses in Awadhi are written with no definition offered. Line by line the students take turns reading the text in the cadence set by the intern, placing proper emphasis where the Awadhi requires. A student that struggles to repeat a word or phrase correctly may have to repeat it until she gets it right, which can be as many as fifteen or twenty times. The interns' emphasis on precision is a lesson learned from Shrutiji.

All of the Kendra students had gathered one morning for an impromptu lecture Shrutiji was giving on the importance of giving blessings while we waited for a film to arrive. She asked if there was anybody in the group that remembered the Bala blessing from the *Ramayana*. A tall thin boy with wispy hair and a shy smile raised his hand and volunteered to recite it. The blessing was long but he managed to remember every line of

it. To me the effort was impressive, deserving of praise, but Shrutiiji looked to the rest of the class and said, “That was good, but did anyone catch his pronunciation mistake?” “Kinha”, one of the kids offered, “He say kinha wrong.” “He *said* kinha wrong”, Shrutiiji corrected. “But no, that’s not it.” There were several other attempts to discern what the student had mispronounced but I could not understand them. It didn’t matter anyway as none of them identified the correct word. When Shrutiiji identified the word he had mispronounced the children looked expectantly at their teacher, waiting to hear the correction. The boy who misspoke had to remain standing throughout the ordeal, waiting to hear what he had done wrong. The treatment he received seemed unnecessarily punitive, humiliating even, for a minor pronunciation error. He did, after all, just sing a hymn in Hindi before his peers, getting nearly every line correct. To my fresh eyes, his performance was worthy of high praise, especially for a kid deemed extremely ‘cool’ by his peers and who I later found out was considered a problem student by some of the teachers. To my mind he should be praised for such a brave effort, and I wrote as much in my field journal at the time. Taking the side of the young man standing alone amid his peers as his faults were recounted I condemningly recorded the event as the teachers, “hammering poor boy who got up to chant the Bala blessing about mispronunciation of a single Hindi word. Clearly,” I observed, “the emphasis on perfection is immense.”

My bias in favor of the student who, from my perspective, demonstrated not only courage before his peers but a willingness to buy into the teachers’ program, is evident from my field notes. My own similar experiences growing up in a very strict Baptist church left me bitter and confrontational toward my Bible instructors. Watching this young man stand before his instructors and peers to receive not praise but criticism for

his admirable efforts struck me as bordering on the cruel. Wouldn't it make sense, I wondered, to employ positive reinforcement in this case, especially for a so-called 'problem' student? Wouldn't the attention on his minute failure in the face of his larger success discourage him from participating and investing in the rest of the program? Won't he grow weary, as I did in the church, of being singled out as the resistant student?

As I observed more of these kinds of interactions and got to know the students, teachers, and parents better I grew more bold with my questions, and on several occasions virtually interrogated Shrutiji about her strategies. I asked in particular and often about the boy she seemed so critical of. To her, Mahindra needed this kind of rigorous attention to detail, lest he become complacent with mediocrity, or worse, realized that he lived in a country of low standards and could therefore get by with little effort. It was in relation to Mahindra that the Kendra's logic, especially Shrutiji's, came into sharper relief for me. If a student is praised for work less than perfect, less than the absolute best that can be performed, a standard has been set that asks little of him. If the Hindu community is to become a disciplined one, and in the process promote discipline as a larger national value of Trinidad, standards must be not only maintained but continually raised. Should a student be rewarded for substandard work merely for having done the work we perpetuate, by Kendra's logic, a nation tolerant of second-rate effort. Shrutiji wants the children to strive for perfection, not mediocrity. The logic that underwrites their pursuit of perfection then emerges not only from a desire for their community to succeed within competitive capitalism but also from frustration with living in a country viewed from the metropolitan powers as second rate. Another event involving the same boy aptly illustrates this frustration.

Students are routinely asked to write and then perform, either by reading alone or acting out with others, a skit dealing with some issue relevant to the *Ramayana*. Working with another class for most of the morning, I returned to Shrutiji's class just as Mahindra, the problem student, was finishing a story he had written. All I caught was that the story had something to do with the United States military. The students evidently found it amusing and laughed their approval. Shrutiji looked stern and then exasperated. Why, she wondered, can't we base our stories here in Trinidad using our army? "Trinidad has an army that is well-structured and all over the place," she reminded the suddenly dour students. "Why not use ours? You see, you are all brainwashed." She then went on to discuss the problem of identity, admonishing the students to "locate your identity in your country and in your culture." Her use of the term "your culture" is slightly ambiguous here, but, given the context, it is likely she had in mind the whole of Trinidad and not just Hindu culture. That being the case, the event with Mahindra illustrates to me her investment in a broader Trinidadian culture.

Mahindra's story points up a constant source of frustration not only for Shrutiji but for many community leaders, intellectuals, social critics, and national advocates. As Selwyn Ryan has pointed out in his massive biography of Eric Williams (2009), Trinidad's nascent nationalist movement, starting in earnest after the first world war, faced deflating indifference from a population unused to regarding Trinidad as anything other than a colonial backwater. Even Trinidad's intellectuals feared the repercussions of independence, afraid that the fledgling nation would not be able to stand on its own without the support of a more capable economic and political power. Henry Hudson

Phillips, a member of Trinidad's political elite in the 1940s and 50s, wrote that independence from Great Britain was pure folly.

The West Indies can never stand alone nationally, economically, culturally, or otherwise without the protection of a great power. Let British capitalism take flight from Trinidad tomorrow, and we face disaster; let British law and order and the much criticized British administration depart, and the West Indies would revert to barbarism within a year. Our plain duty, even self-interest and self-preservation, dictates that we continue to be part of the British Empire. We do ourselves a great injustice if we feel we can do without Britain and that we should not share the little we have with her sons and daughters, in return for the manifold blessing we receive. (cited in Ryan 2009: 87)

Though Trinidad has been able to build on the gains engendered by a strong independence movement, a relatively stable democracy, and a consistently solvent economy, for those community leaders committed to staying in the country to promote viable and competitive communities, stories like Mahindra's are a continual source of frustration. For teachers like those at the Kendra, and the young leaders of skill building groups like the HSS, the problem they confront is a persistent belief among the youth, even if unarticulated in such bald terms, that Trinidad's cultural and intellectual contributions to the world are perennially second rate. On the surface, it seems paradoxical that Shrutiji, who spends so much time trying to steer her students away from a mass culture she is openly critical of, would be defensive about students looking elsewhere for inspiration. Yet the paradox is easily resolved when we recognize that Shrutiji's frustration stems from her earnest longing to encourage young people to invest emotionally and intellectually in a country that has suffered from generations of underinvesting in Trinidad. When I was the inadvertent cause of Shrutiji's frustration in this regard, it became much clearer to me that the campaign she, and other similarly

situated leaders, is waging, is one not merely of national pride, but one of cultural reconstruction.

A non-profit group in Port of Spain had invited me to participate in their annual parade one morning. The parade was to start at 9:00 AM and, as usual, I fretted about being there on time. Getting from the Kendra, out in the little town of Enterprise just east of Chaguanas, to Port of Spain takes a minimum of four connections using public transportation. The afternoon before the parade I related my anxiety to Shrutiji and a group of others who helped me plan my route to arrive at the non-profit on time. I had done the route dozens of times and knew the drill well, but I had never had to negotiate it so early in the morning going into Port of Spain, the direction of the heaviest traffic at that time of day. I left the Kendra at 7:00 AM, figuring on about a half an hour of flex time with which to get some coffee and a light breakfast once I got into the city. A late bus and long walk later, I arrived at the parade at precisely nine on the hour. I chatted with some of the non-profit leaders and community members, put on a t-shirt they gave me to create a look of uniformity among the marchers, and waited for the parade to start. And waited and waited and waited. By 9:30 I was wilting in the blaring sunlight from hunger and dehydration. Everybody seemed to be in place, yet the parade remained stationary, waiting, I learned from an organizer explaining to a small impatient mob, for a group coming from Arima caught in traffic. “Why they didn’t leave earlier then?” an older woman asked in irritation. I took that as my cue to head over to the Catholic run cafe on Frederick street to wait for the parade to pass before surreptitiously joining in. On my way, I met a reporter from a local station filming the event. He was extremely agitated because he also to get to a press conference with Prime Minister Persad-

Bissessar at 10:00. It was quarter till and the parade showed no signs of budging. The journalist looked exasperated and said, “You see, anytime is Trinidad time. Anytime you feel like showing up is the right time.”

When I returned to the Kendra Shrutiji asked me how the parade went and whether I got there on time following her advice. I reported that the bus was late but I still managed to arrive on time but that the parade didn’t start until almost 10:30. She shook her head, looking almost annoyed and apologetic at the same time, as if to say, “We’re not all like that.” I related what the journalist told me about Trinidad time and without hesitation she refuted him in a way that paradoxically agreed with him. “No”, she said forcefully, “that’s not true. We cannot accept that. We must be more disciplined than that. We are more professional than that.” I regretted mentioning the journalist’s slight because I had obviously broached what for Shrutiji, and many others, is a source of embarrassment. In so doing, I had inadvertently leveled an insult aimed indirectly at her. Shrutiji’s terse response embodied simultaneously a refutation that punctual indifference is a necessary hallmark of Trinidadians, an admonition that such indifference must change, and a critique of a culture that allows this to happen. To me, that the parade started when it did was not a big deal. Is a parade something that should start right on time? But it was this event, more so than any other, that brought home for me what the Kendra, Shrutiji especially, is fighting against and for.

By rehearsing the journalist’s quip, I had also rehearsed a stereotype about Trinidad’s lack of professionalism, about its chronic inability to function smoothly, and its reputation as an island that cares only for a good fête. In this sense, I was not merely a messenger, but a participant in the construction of the stereotype, which Shrutiji

rightfully contested. The purpose of the Kendra, and of similar programs like the HSS and the Chin Maya Mission, is to shape subjects that do care about professionalism, achievement, dedication, respect for others and themselves, and about devotion to their community, to their aspirations, and to exemplars, from Rama and Sita, to Shrutiji and Raviji, who embody these ideals. It is in this way that the work of the Kendra and its related organizations can be understood as active engineering of, on the individual level, subjectivity, and, in a broader sense, the public imaginary that carries vestigial stereotypes left by the imperial worldview.

Fearful No More

Myriad theories, both emic and etic, abound as to why Indo-Trinidadians took so long to become active members of Trinidad's political machinery. Indians have complained that they were actively excluded from electoral politics. Scholars have located the problem in geography and culture – they were too removed, both geographically and culturally, from the Creole and urban dominated cultural-political center of Trinidad (Samaroo 2006; Brereton 1982; Trotman 1986). A belief popular among some in the Afro-Trinidadian masses is that they are either a) too involved in business to care, or b) too inclined toward corruption to stay in office (see op/ed article in Chapter I). Among both Afro-and Indo-Trinidadians, however, is a commonly held stereotype that Indo-Trinidadians have historically been and remain too timid to stand up against Afro-Trinidadians. A shocking tirade in a small market underscored for me the pervasiveness of, and frustration with, this apparent reality.

The corner market near my apartment in Port of Spain is run by an East Asian woman and a moody Indo-Trinidadian man with a boxy face and greased back shoulder length hair that curls tightly at the ends. On some days he's chatty and jovial, on others quiet and sullen. I stop there every morning I stay in the city to get a peanut drink or mauby juice and a newspaper. I read the paper as I wait in line, often using the headlines to make small talk with the proprietors. In July of 2010, after Kamla had taken office, there was discussion, mostly among the news punditry and those bitter about nearly four decades of PNM hegemony, about whether former PM Patrick Manning should be tried on corruption charges. The allegations were rather loose, but there did seem to be some legitimate concern that he had abused the privileges of his office. Based on the reports I had been reading, Manning's graft appeared no more egregious than what most officers of his station, in any country of the world, dabble in from time to time. But Manning had become a polarizing figure, staunchly supported by PNM stalwarts and the object of scorn, ridicule, and fierce critiques and wild accusations by nearly everyone else. He was being accused by members of other parties (mostly the COP and a few members of the UNC) with graft, cronyism, improper use of funds, and, quite inexplicably, stealing a grand piano from the Presidential Mansion. Predictably, Manning refuted all the claims, made a joke about the absurdity of stealing pianos, and spouted a few platitudes about serving his country honorably while in office. I watched the Manning "bacchanal" with interest not so much for the juicy political gossip that usually attracts my attention but, in this case, for the parallel bacchanal that went down when Panday was removed from office on uncannily similar grounds.

Corruption charges against Manning occupied the front pages of the three dailies for the better part of a week before fading into obscurity. Kamla, ever politically savvy, expressed little interest in pursuing charges against Manning, issuing vague statements that cleverly implicated him and his PNM party in malfeasance while demonstrating her own magnanimity in not kicking a man when he's down. Reading the headlines with relish, I asked Sammy, the corner store proprietor, if he thought the UNC/COP coalition would pursue charges against Manning. At the time, it seemed an innocuous question, hardly the stuff of racially tinged outrage. But I had opened for Sammy a Pandora's box of frustration and irritation. "Dey (UNC) 'fraid of dem (PNM)", he said. "If it was the other way around, dey would charge him right now. Dey would jail him. But dey 'fraid. Indians always 'fraid the black man. Dey (Indians) came later. The blacks are bigger and intimidatin' and so the Indians doormats for the Afro-Trinis". As he spoke his voice rose as he moved around the shop gesticulating wildly. I and the other patrons stood silently and listened, slightly stunned. The East Asian woman stopped checking and bagging, watching Sammy as he released his bottled rage. "Dey never gonna charge him 'cause dey 'fraid. He do the same thing as Panday, but what happen to Panday? He kicked out of office. Manning stay ten years and nobody say notin'!" He quickly noticed that he had grabbed everyone's attention, including his Afro-Trinidadian customers, and there was a moment of silence as he took note of his audience. In the same tone of outrage he turned the direction of his tirade from race relations to abstract rights and democratic principles, "I speakin' my right. That's why dey don't like me. I speakin' my right like no one else will do".

While it was not clear who the “they” are that do not like him (Afro-Trinidadians? Meek Indo-Trinidadians? Politicians?), Sammy does see himself in a minority of Indo-Trinidadians who will speak out for their rights. Like Raviji, Sammy sees the problem with Indo-Trinidadian failure in politics as a symptom of fear. Though Raviji is careful not to couch his concerns in racialized terms, opting instead to highlight the Indo-Trinidadian history of being latecomers to the island Sammy briefly alluded to, he routinely reminds his students that Indo-Trinidadians allow themselves to be trampled by those more bold and fearless than them. Indo-Trinidadians, Raviji contends, are too passive in public arenas, particularly politics, which stems not only from arriving late to the island but also from a Hindu worldview that tends to look at the big picture and thus see immediate needs as inconsequential. For Raviji, the amelioration of Trinidad’s rural Indian communities depends on their learning not to be afraid to “get up in front of people”. Just as the students in the performance classes, Indo-Trinidadian adults must learn to perform confidence, poise, and control in front of others while also fearlessly voicing their criticisms in bold yet creative and diplomatic language. The structure of the Kendra’s programs is designed with this set of skills in mind. The improvisational skits are designed to help the students model quick thinking and confident performance of their ideas. The precise recitation of *Ramayana* verses reinforces the importance of attention to detail. Through the performance and, ideally, the performativity of the *Ramayana*, students will become Ramas and Sitas.

CHAPTER III

“I AM A TRINIDADIAN. I AM A HINDU. I AM AN INDIAN”: NATIONALISM, PRESERVATIONISM, AND REINVENTION IN CREOLE HINDUISM

What conclusions are a group of people willing to draw from the ‘national sentiment’ found among them? No matter how emphatic and subjectively sincere a pathos may be formed among them, what sort of specific joint action are they ready to develop? The extent to which in the diaspora a convention is adhered to as a ‘national’ trait varies just as much as does the importance of common conventions for the belief in the existence of a separate ‘nation.’

~ Max Weber, *The Nation*

Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the script of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our anticolonial resistance and postcolonial misery. Even our imaginations must remain forever colonized.

~ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*

It would seem that mythological worlds have been built up only to be shattered again, and that new worlds were built from the fragments.

~ Franz Boas, epigraph to *The Structural Study of Myth*, Lévi-Strauss

Toward the end of a lengthy interview Raviji, founder of the Kendra, paused for dramatic effect while discussing his life’s work and then declared that he was a Hindu nationalist. To stress the point he repeated his declaration a second time, verbatim, “I am a Hindu nationalist.” His delivery was nonchalant but direct. At the time I took his unequivocal declaration for what it was – pure self-identification – and so didn’t press the issue any further. After all, I was in Trinidad to research religious expressions of ethnic nationalism, and this was ethnographic gold. The discourse of India/Hindu nationalism

within India and the diaspora is voluminous, and what I had just witnessed was yet another iteration of that well documented nationalism. There was little question that Raviji was but one among many diasporic nationalists trumpeting the greatness of all things Indian, in particular, India's contribution to global philosophies in the form of Vedantic Hinduism. But the more I reflected on the point, the less unequivocal it became. What does it mean to be a Hindu nationalist in a predominantly Christian, Afro-Creole country? Is Raviji's nationalism a direct import of the well-developed Hindu nationalism in India (Kishwar 2001; Chatterjee 1993a; 1993b; Bhatt 2001; Sharma 2003; Reddy 2006)? Is such a social form as nationalism, which in India arose in response to a highly specific set of theological (Bhatt 2001), political (Chatterjee 1993a), and social (Reddy 2006; Hansen 1999) events, so easily exported as any other commodity? Is the idea of *Hindutva*, a Hindu essence, meaningful in Trinidad? And what does it mean to be a Hindu nationalist in a country where Hinduism was never the dominant religion? In other words, Hindu nationalism in India is first and foremost about fixing Hinduism's place as the dominant organizing principle of India, to the exclusion and marginalization of other secular and religious logics. To the exclusion of the numerous other religious possibilities that have existed for countless centuries side by side with, and in some cases even subsumed under, Hinduism, the ideological hegemony of Hindu nationalism attempts to situate Hinduism as the natural order of things for India. Like conservative xenophobias elsewhere, Hindu nationalism, in the final analysis, is about the naturalization of a power hierarchy and the self-appointed right to stay atop it. Rhetoric from revivalist groups such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its political wing, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), attempts to establish the primacy of

Hinduism as state religion and India as the ancestral home of Hinduism (Kishwar 2001: 109-133). Hindu nationalism in India flowered because this position of dominance was, and for many still is, threatened from external forces like colonialism, Islam, modernity, Christianity, secularism. The threat of positional erosion, real or perceived, prompted social anxiety, motivating numerous revivals, reinterpretations of tradition, and even violence toward those that would usurp Hindu supremacy (Reddy 2006: 35-42).

Hindu Trinidad, however, never had any incursions to fear, for they are the late-comers to the island, only arriving in the mid-19th century. Indians arrived to Trinidad in successive waves between 1845 and 1917 to a largely Christian colony, and did so with Muslims among their masses. Their first concerns were practical ones. How do we scratch out a living amid squalid conditions, poor pay, and extreme competition for scarce resources? The geographic, cultural and legal isolation (Munasinghe 2001: 71-76) experienced by the Indian immigrants, in addition to the labor conditions and hierarchies of the plantation system (Vertovec 1992), forced upon them a radical reprioritization of social-cultural values and logics (Look Lai 1993). Furthermore, as we will see later in this chapter, many Indian Hindus viewed travelling abroad as a taboo because it diluted one's spiritual purity. The strands of Hindu nationalism developing in India throughout the 19th and 20th centuries I will argue did not travel with the migrants, and, even if it had, could not take root in the soil of the new World plantations.

The Rise of Hindu Nationalisms in India

In outlining some of the important strands of Hindu nationalism emerging in India throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, I would like to identify the areas of influence

these reformation movements had on Trinidad's growing Hindu community. As I will argue throughout this text, the radically different social, economic, and political context rendered much of the nationalist and reformationist discourse unusable for Trinidadian Hindus. As Hansen (1999) rightly illustrates, India's Hindu nationalism flowered not only in the political spheres that gave rise to anti-colonial and independence movements, but also, more broadly, in the public imaginary. Neither, then, was Hindu nationalism simply a religious phenomenon reflecting an emergent fundamentalism responding to modern epistemological and theological pressures. Hindu nationalism, Hansen argues, took shape in the public imaginary, within the shared and contested realm of public culture, which embraces moral, religious, and political (both social and juridical) discourses (1999: 19). Similarly, I will assert that while some features of Hindu nationalism in India did influence Trinidad's nascent Hindu community, both directly and indirectly, the religious life and practice of Trinidadian Hindus must be understood in a Caribbean creole context. Though historians have made much of Indian isolation in the hinterlands of Trinidad's Central region, allowing Hinduism to flourish, the new context not only provided limitations on the shape Hindu practice could assume (e.g. caste maintenance, see Vertovec 2010), it also influenced the logic by which Hinduism was interpreted (Brereton 1993; Trotman 1986; Laurence 1985). As I will discuss, Hindus in Trinidad faced many of the same external pressures as Hindus in India. Yet the character of what manifested in both regions turned out to be radically different. Central to my argument is the conclusion that Hinduism is understood, interpreted, imagined, and mobilized in markedly different ways in Trinidad, altering the way in which the Hindu

self and community are created and shaped. Thus, the shift in terrain, or what Appadurai would call an ethnoscape (1996: 48-65), inaugurated a shift in Hindu subjectivity.

The Sacred as Political: The Emergence of a Political Hindu Nationalism

The search for a postcolonial modernity has been tied, from its very birth, with its struggle against modernity.

~ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*

Hindu nationalism in India reached its theoretical apogee with the work of V.D. Savarkar in the early 20th century. A devout Hindu and Indian patriot, Savarkar agitated against colonialism in the 1920s and 30s, publishing his magnum opus, *Hindutva*, in 1923. V.D. Sarvarkar's articulation of Hindutva is an attempt to encompass categories of religious creed and practice, race, and nation into one unified concept. Savarkar's 'brochure' *Hindutva* (2003 [1923]), at 138 pages, stands as a catalytic document of colonial era Hindu nationalism. Allegedly scratched out on the walls of his British prison cell and then committed to memory before the walls were repainted, *Hindutva* is more ultra patriotic manifesto than religious text. If, as Chatterjee (1993; see also Handler 1998; and Anderson 1981) has pointed out, nationalisms require "the invention of tradition" as an essential component of cultural constructivism, *Hindutva* is archetypal nationalist historiography. Overwrought and tending toward the dramatic, with words and phrases like "adventurous", "intrepid", "enduring", and "strong and vigorous race", *Hindutva* is the romanticized history of an unblemished race fighting against the oppressive forces of Muslim and Western imperialisms. It is a plea for solidarity. Unlike religious reformers attempting to codify a Hindu dogma, Savarkar attempted to distill the essential substance that bound Hindusthan (India), Hinduism, race, and cultural forms and turn them into a political position. Reformers and protonationalists before him, such as Dayananda

Saraswati (1824-1883), founder of the Arya Samaj and a 19th century religious reformer regarded as the first Hindu fundamentalist to provoke widespread changes in Hindu interpretation, recast Hinduism as an ultimately monotheistic religious complex (Bhatt 2001: 16). Saraswati argued that the divinity and thus infallibility of the Vedic texts rendered later texts that gave rise to the pantheon, such as the *Puranas* and the epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, invalid as indicators of God (Sharma 2003: 22-23). Saraswati's movement, called the *Arya Samaj* (Society of Aryans), inspired new iterations of nationalistic discourse identifying an encompassing Hindu primordialism. His central ambition was to return Hinduism to its pure, uncorrupted form, which, like the Western Abrahamic religions, was a steadfastly monotheistic tradition before the introduction of *smriti* (essentially the epics, but literally "transmitted" texts vs. *shruti*, or "revealed" texts, primarily the Vedas). The Arya Samaj's 'semitic Hinduism' was one of the first of many revivalist movements to spring up during what has been termed the 'Hindu renaissance' (Bhatt 2001: 16; also Chatterjee 1993b: 35-75).

In similar fashion, the rhetoric of Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), though much more politicized than Saraswati's, sought to reform both Hinduism as a practice and Hindus themselves as more resilient, more manly, and thus less easily conquered people (Sharma 2003: 46-69). Dispirited by India's chronic inability to defend itself from invaders, Aurobindo contrived an explanation and prescription for this malady. In his view, India possessed the requisite technological, intellectual, and military powers to vanquish would be conquerors. However, in order to mobilize these forces effectively Hindus would need to reorient the way in which they self-identified. For too long Hindus had embraced the feminine principles of the priestly Brahmin caste. In order to rectify this effeminate and

feminizing principle Hindus would need to embrace the spirit of the warrior, or manly, caste, the Kshatriyas (Sharma 2003: 53-55). In a bid to convince Hindus that they must embrace the sacred ideal of the masculine warrior if they wished to end India's open door policy to conquerors, Aurobindo crafted an elaborate argument that placed the fully realized Kshatriya warrior above human moral codes. To validate his claim, Aurobindo invoked the iconic scene in the Bhagavad Gita where the god Krishna implores a reluctant Arjuna to fulfill his duty and finish the battle against his own kin as his Kshatriya caste demands of him. Arjuna's doubt and moral hand wringing serve as the central symbol of Aurobindo's refashioned morality. In the famous scene, Krishna allays Arjuna's concerns by reminding him that caste duty rises above all other concerns, even those of filial piety. Such moral trepidation is a worldly concern and thus is *adharma*, or non-dharmic. The true warrior fulfills his karmic duty in a detached yet purposeful manner (Easwaran, trans. 1985). Likewise, Aurobindo argues, "the first virtue of the Kshatriya is not to bow his neck to an unjust yoke but to protect his weak and suffering countrymen against the oppressor and welcome death in a just and righteous battle" (cited in Sharma 2003: 50). The ethical dilemma in Aurobindo's program notwithstanding, the tradition he attempts to invent operates from an interpretive logic that shapes a new national ideal from religious iconography and lore. Like Saraswati before him, Aurobindo's reformation project focused on specific features of Hindu practice and interpretation that would modernize Hindu theology and, more importantly, re-establish Hinduism's global prominence as a great intellectual and religious power. The aim of both Aurobindo and Saraswati, as with the many other reformers of the Hindu

Renaissance, is to develop a 'postcolonial modernity' while also contending with transnational, Western modernity.

In distinction to purely hermeneutic projects attempting to recreate Hindu practice and knowledge, Savarkar (1824-1883) sought a more ontologically embracing project. Particular interpretive traditions within the vast Hindu complex were not so much his interest, as they were with religious reformers variously influenced by Muslim, Christian, and modernist incursions. Rather, for Savarkar, the point was to identify and name that essential element coursing through history from the early Indus valley civilization up to the 20th century that all Hindus, regardless of sect, shared. Hinduism's durability, he posited, is testament to and evidence of this determining essence. Whatever interpretive and ritual differences might exist, all Hindus shared belief in a common principle that animates every practice, however idiosyncratic. Drawing from nationalist theorists before him (see Bhatt 2001: 77) who adapted the term from Sanskrit, Savarkar referred to this principle as Hindutva. For Savarkar, and countless commentators to follow, Hindutva is the inalterable essence that lends Hinduism its unique power and resilience. Thus it is not Hinduism itself as an alterable and interpretable religious form that is at issue, it is the determining substance, or *Hinduness*, that binds Hinduism, history, land, and people.

Hindutva embraces all the departments of thought and activity of the whole Being of our Hindu race. Therefore, to understand the significance of this term Hindutva, we must first understand the essential meaning of the word Hindu itself and realize how it came to exercise such imperial sway over the hearts of millions of mankind and won a loving allegiance from the bravest and best of them. But before we can do that, it is imperative to point out that we are by no means attempting a definition or even description of the more limited, less satisfactory and essentially sectarian term Hinduism. (Savarkar 2003 [1923]: 4)

Conceived of as both a racial typology and a body of “thought and activity”, Hindutva expresses the “adventurous valor” that is a hallmark of all Hindus (2003: 5). It is the constellation of “a common nation (Rashtra) a common race (Jati) and a common civilization (Sanskriti)” (2003: 116).

The ideal conditions, therefore, under which a nation can attain perfect solidarity and cohesion would, other things being equal, be found in the case of those people who inhabit the land they adore, the land of whose forefathers is also the land of their Gods and Angels, of Seers and Prophets; the scenes of whose history are also the scenes of their mythology. (2003: 136)

Thus, should the Jews be able to re-establish themselves in Palestine (remember, Savarkar is writing this in the early 1920s) they would be in a prime position to realize the kind of national solidarity that makes a nation great. He goes on to list the potential in a number of Middle Eastern and European states, though none of them possess the unique advantage of India. China is “almost as richly gifted with geographical, racial, cultural essentials as the Hindus are,” but miss out on having, as India does, “a sacred and a perfect language, the Sanskrit, and a sanctified Motherland” (2003: 137). For Savarkar, the unique blessing of Hindus is the congeries of (sacred) language, land, culture, and contiguous history, a congeries that indicates the unifying structure of Hindutva. The concept attempts to merge categories of being and praxis in order to transcend sectarian differences among the different branches and interpretive schools of Hinduism. Hindutva then is both an ontological and political project. By delimiting what is and what is not Hindutva, Savarkar constructs a set of social categories that attempts to privilege certain practices and epistemologies and thus empower certain groups of Indians, while marginalizing others. Savarkar’s iteration of religious fundamentalism is an expression of governmentality that would establish acceptable and unacceptable ways of being. In

drawing boundaries between what is and what is not Hinduism Sarvarkar infuses the religion with an interpretive conservatism that excludes forms too distant from the center. Such exclusion attempts to render those Indians of the ontologic periphery silent and thus politically powerless.

As a transcendent concept, Hindutva extracts from historical, religious, and territorial categories an essence that, once recognized, will allow Hindus to self-actualize in ways they could not before, offering them “a future greater than what any other people on earth can dream of” (2003: 138). Thus, for Savarkar, as with other Hindu primordialists before and after him (see, for example, Tilak 1984) a national consciousness and shared sense of destiny is inextricably linked to the “sanctified Motherland”. Hindutva therefore is not, strictly speaking, a religious reformation project in the vein of the nationalists before him. However, like his predecessors, Hindutva does operate as a form of preservationism, even if in a highly politicized fashion. By identifying and articulating a Hindu essence, Savarkar was able to generate a nationalist ethos that forged primordialism with modernity, territory with religion, and ontology with history. It is from this crucible that modern Hindu nationalism in India has been forged.

For Trinidadian Hindus, the concept of Hindutva, such as it exists, is, by contrast, mostly taken as a spiritual substance. The term has little currency in Trinidad and was only ever mentioned or reflected upon when I brought it up. The notion did not sit well with some of my participants who, I later inferred, might have been uncomfortable with an implied link between their work and the xenophobic Hindu nationalists for whom the term has much traction. Ellen, the president of a Hindu mandir in Bharataria, a small suburb on the outskirts of Port of Spain, put it to me this way, “I am Trinidadian first. My

first obligation is to Trinidad. But I am also Indian and want to embrace my culture.” For Ellen, her “culture” clearly derives from India, though she shares that devotion with her country, Trinidad. For many Hindus of Ellen’s age (she was in her mid-fifties when I first met her), identifying their culture with India and their country with Trinidad is common. In a separate interview Raviji echoed Ellen’s statement, which he put in his terms as his “triple identity”. “I am a Trinidadian. I am a Hindu. And I am an Indian.” Younger generations, however, are less apt to identify culturally with India. The rising participation of Indo-Trinidadians in popular culture such as music (chutney soca) and in politics has drawn the younger generations of Indo-Trinidadians into the broader shared space of Trinidadian public and popular culture¹. Even among the older generations then, Hindutva’s meaning is not only greatly diluted compared with its incarnations in India, but it also considerably less traction.

For those familiar with the term, Hindutva simply stands as a unifying ethos, a kind of theological rallying point that binds Hindus through common worship practices and beliefs. The concept is problematic and of little use for Trinidadian Hindus, Raviji tells me, merely by virtue of the journey over the Kalam Pani, or dark waters of the Pacific, Indians undertook in the 19th century. “There was a taboo against travelling”, he said, “because leaving India was thought to dilute one’s Indian substance. So travelling just wasn’t done by Indians except those going to work in other colonies.” These Indians, he suggests, were already considered less Indian, less Hindu, than those that remained at

¹ Though different styles of art and music between Afro- and Indo-Trinidadians continue to define their respective contributions, their styles reflect distinctly Trinidadian themes. For example, as one musician told me, “If you want to hear heavy metal, and some punk, you have to go to the Indian areas. They love that stuff. Walk in the Indian neighborhoods and that’s all you’ll hear coming out of their houses. In the black areas it’s almost all soca and reggae and hip hop.”

home. The notion of Hindutva then could have little meaning for a community already considered by Hindu elites of India to be less Hindu than those who stayed in the *rashtra*. That leaving the Hindu *rashtra*, or nation, the axis mundi of the Hindu world, and living among a nation of non-Hindus robs one of their Hindu essence indicates that such an essence is not immutably fixed. Rather, its strength derives from and is contingent on remaining a Hindu in India, the land of the “Vedic seers”.

Sat Maharaj, president of the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha, is widely considered to be one of the most conservative Hindu leaders in Trinidad, and unquestionably the most outspoken. His guest columns appear regularly in Trinidad’s three dailies and his press conferences and interviews typically evoke a wide range of responses – from utter hostility to complete agreement – by many Trinidadians. His July 2009 piece in the Trinidad Guardian titled “Who is a Hindu?” calls for a “modern” definition of Hinduism and laments that the tradition “has not yet articulated itself clearly to the modern mind.” In contrast to Hindutva discourse, Sat Maharaj’s article is tellingly Trinidadian as it calls for “a redefinition and new understanding of Hinduism” yet hesitates to offer a concrete definition. Instead, after complaining that even “Hindus with a modern western education usually do not understand their own tradition” he abruptly shifts directions and finishes the second half of the article with a story about a French businessman living in India who follows Hindu practice and changed his name from Christian Fabre to Swami Pranavananda Brahmedra Avadhuta. Presumably, what Sat Maharaj is trying to communicate is that a Hindu may well be anyone who embraces the faith and, following the Vishwa Hindu Parishad’s definition of a Hindu, “accepts and practices the ancient philosophies and preachings of Bharatiya [India]”. Oblique as it is, Sat Maharaj’s

argument, astonishingly for a conservative Hindu, calls for a re-evaluation of who may be considered a Hindu based not on birth, country of origin, or caste, but rather on one's commitment to the dharma. Trinidad's multicultural context, coupled with Hindu Trinidadians' historic struggles to prove their Hinduness to Indian Hindus helps us understand Sat Maharaj's openness that rests simply on commitment to the dharma. It further illustrates the complications of the concept of Hindutva in a country where Hinduism itself is continually re-imagined.

Valences of Nationalism/ Taxonomies of Hindu Nationalism

Nationalism shares with other social interpretive categories – religion, culture, syncretism – a confounding degree of ambiguity. Attempts at universalizing its forms and features have met with the same humbling results as many of our other prized interpretive schema. The term does capture a certain sentiment, and, like religion, we know it when we see it. But what sentiments qualify as nationalism? Or what *arrangement* of sentiments qualify? And to what degree of zeal must they be embraced to qualify? Is there a threshold we can identify that when crossed moves a people from mere self-awareness to nationalism? And in what way is that threshold culturally and discursively determined? What I would like to explore here is where that threshold lies and to problematize its use as an interpretive form. It is worth asking why some groups are labeled as nationalists while others, who appear to embrace the same, or at least highly similar, set of principles are not. For example, Fundamentalist Christians in the United States, since at least the 1960s, have turned their focus toward the active and revolutionary participation of their members in electoral politics (for an excellent history

of Christian fundamentalism in America see Harding 2000; see also Crapanzano 2000). They agitate openly for the return of a Christian nation (cf. Hindu rashtra) and lament the decline of Christian based rituals in public institutions (e.g. prayer in schools and court rooms). They lobby for Christian causes in congress, attempt to shape knowledge through control over textbook publication and school boards, and exert an enormous influence on public discourse through the monopolization of various media (Harding 2000: 61-82). Like Hindu reformers in India such as Saraswati, Aurobindo, and Savarkar, who feared the intrusion of outsiders, many Christian fundamentalists in the US promote incendiary anti-Islamic rhetoric and violence toward perceived threats to the American way (recall Pat Robertson's plea to assassinate Venezuela's democratically elected president Hugo Chavez). America, many Christian fundamentalists believe, is a Christian nation, made great through God's divine will. We exclude Him from public and political life at our peril (Juergensmeyer 2009: 405-410). Yet, though they promote a national ideal, whose subtext is often ethnically biased toward white Americans, they are seldom, if ever, referred to in either popular or scholarly literature as Christian nationalists. But Hindus in Trinidad, whose agenda is far more innocuous, and far less ambitious, are *known* to be nationalists. It is worth considering then several of the salient strands of nationalist theory to understand how nationalism, as an interpretive model, is applied to some groups (Trinidadian Hindus) and not to others. What follows is not intended to be an exhaustive treatment of theories of nationalism, but rather an outline of several influential schools of thought with the intent of attempting to determine what established category of nationalism, if any, politically active Trinidadian Hindus fit into. By exploring several salient theories of nationalism and later the history of Hinduism in Trinidad, I would like

to question the applicability of the discursive term nationalism to contemporary Hindu communities in Trinidad. Is it appropriate, or even accurate, to interpret Trinidadian Hindus as nationalists simply because they are socially and politically active? And is Hindu preservationism an unproblematic fact of social engineering?

Post-colonial nationalism is reputedly a Western European export to its former colonies. Early observers and theorists viewed nationalism as a worthwhile and necessary institution in a state's social-political development. Nationalism is a marker of a people's arrival to modernity, they posited, and a sign of participation in post-enlightenment principles of statecraft and collective consciousness. More than simply a reflexive moment in the historical trajectory of a people, it is, more importantly, the invention of "nations where they do not exist" (Gellner, cited in Chatterjee 1993a: 4). Reflecting a positivistic approach to nation building, nationalism paves the road to self-determination. However regrettable any form of despotism emerging from nationalist ideology may be, it is undeniably better than no such ideology, or consciousness, at all. Such obstacles are merely wrinkles to be ironed out of the larger fabric of a nation's historical telos. Once a national consciousness has been realized, it was argued, the nation may begin contributing its unique ideas to the common fund of humanity (Chatterjee 1993a: 8). The realization of a nationalist sentiment then is not only the beginning of self-determination, it is the necessary acquisition of reason that allows a nation-state to develop industrialism and, hence, modernity. Nationalism, it was assumed, was a step on the staircase of geo-economic upward mobility.

Liberal observers, predictably, were not so easily seduced by the siren call of nationalism as reason. As one critic unequivocally states it, "Nationalism is the ideology

of scoundrels...” (Anderson et al. 2008: 148). Liberal critics, repulsed by its narrowness, feared nationalism could only exacerbate tensions between states and promote tyranny within them. Reason, it was asserted, is not always a good thing. In his iconic essay “Dark Gods and Their Rites”, Elie Kedourie points to nationalists’ cynical use of education and objectivity in the justification of human destruction. Western educated Africans and Asians, armed with objectivity, exploit their insight into social structures and processes to mobilize native symbols in the service of what he calls “secular millennialism” (Kedourie 1994: 209). Nationalist leaders employ a “conscious and deliberate manipulation of...primitive superstition” to foment anti-imperial animosity and justify violence. Nairn, like Kedourie, sees nationalism as an outwardly imposed ideology that is merely indigenously interpreted (1994: 72). The body of myths, symbols, sentiments that “well up from within” is simply a local manifestation of a global process wrought by the introduction of industrial capitalism (Nairn 1994: 72-4). *Nationalism* (emphasis his), he contends, is only a generic template whose blanks are filled in by local folklore and the invention of tradition. The problem of nationalism then for liberal scholars is not that it is a cultural-historic form that can go wrong, as Plamenatz or Gellner might see it (see Chatterjee 1993a), but that the ideology itself is corrupt to start with as an outgrowth of competitive capitalism. The paradox of nationalism, says Nairn, is that “the most notoriously subjective and ideal of historical phenomena is in fact a by-product of the most brutally and hopelessly material side of the history of the last two centuries” (1994: 72). Nationalist projects are thus merely extensions of the often violent struggle for resources cloaked in positivist rhetoric. Nationalism’s critics see in it an expression of hegemony and, to borrow a phrase from Bourdieu (2008: 191-193),

symbolic violence that promotes a class of dispossessed others². Thus, nationalism in critical discourse is a medium of hegemony, or domination, whose practical value is only one of pretension and division.

Though they differ in their views on the utility and social value of nationalism, critical and supportive strands of nationalist discourse agree on several important features about its practice. First, nationalism is a form of what Hobsbawm (1994: 76) refers to as ‘social engineering’, or invented tradition. Handler’s (1988) sharp exegesis of Quebecois nationalism is one of many such examples (see also Linnekin 1985) that provide an ideal case study in processes of tradition inventing. Integral to this process are historical revisionism, the (re)interpretation of local myths, legends and sacred texts, the mobilization of indigenous symbols and tropes in new contexts and, implicitly, the marginalization, or othering, of those perceived to fall outside the national normative ideal. Nationalism’s critics take Gellner’s proposition that nationalism is not merely the

² “In a society in which overt violence, the violence of the usurer or the merciless master, meets with collective reprobation and is liable either to provoke a violent riposte from the victim or to force him to flee (that is to say, in either case, in the absence of any other recourse, to provoke the annihilation of the very relationship which was intended to be exploited), symbolic violence, the gentle, invisible form of violence, which is never recognized as such, and is not so much undergone as chosen, the violence of credit, confidence, obligation, personal loyalty, hospitality, gifts, gratitude, piety – in short, all the virtues honoured by the code of honour – cannot fail to be seen as the most economical mode of domination, i.e. the mode which best corresponds to the economy of system” (Bourdieu 2008: 192). Bourdieu’s discussion here about the subtle forms of control, coercion, and domination evident in certain social relations neatly articulates liberal reservations with nationalism (see, for example, Nairn 1994). Similar to Gramsci, whose theories of class domination (hegemony) have been much more pronounced in critical approaches to nationalism than Bourdieu’s, what Bourdieu attempts to illustrate are the subtle forms of control that institutions such as nationalism are capable of performing. Carnegie’s moving articulation of the ‘silent norm’ constructed in the nationalist imaginary that would homogenize a nation, and the violence this silently commits against those who cannot exemplify the ‘normative national self’, aptly demonstrates Bourdieu’s point (Carnegie 2002).

awakening of a people to self-awareness but the creation of a state a step further, asserting in various ways that it is the creation of a homogenous social-political body that would attempt to naturalize and police a new 'silent norm' (Carnegie 2002). Conservative observers see the rise of nationalisms and the creation of unified states as examples of post-Enlightenment principles of reason and progress at work in the positive development of a state. Recalling the barbarism to civilization evolutionism of L.H. Morgan (2001 [1877]), conservative discourse locates nationalism as a progressive step toward autonomy and industrialism. In contrast, liberal critics see in nationalism a sinister form of governmentality whose pretensions of homogeneity promote majoritarian tyrannies. Whether harbinger of progress or technology of control, nationalism, it is agreed, is an invented tradition attempting to "homogenize the heterogeneous" (Williams 1991). Invented traditions draw on a primordial past linking land, history, and people in a herculean effort to homogenize disparate groups and establish a national ideal. Narrations of nationalism then are ideologies composed of symbolic fragments mobilized to create the illusion of a historically continuous and ethnically complete whole (Bhabha 1990; Williams 1991: 38-42).

Second, nationalism is about self-determination. Its ultimate goal is to unify a people with an aim toward autonomy, control, and power. Though the impulse for unity under a single banner is not new, subsumed under religious institutions in earlier eras (see Anderson 1991) or what Seton-Watson has referred to as 'old nationalism' (1994: 134-137), modern nationalisms emerge from secular logics. Post-Enlightenment, capitalist principles of order, efficiency, and reason offered burgeoning states seeking unity and technologies of population control a means of allowing them to compete in a transformed

global market. Whether nationalist rhetoric is cloaked in religious or secular language makes little difference. The underlying logic of modern nationalism is one that is commensurate and compatible with capitalism and the global power dynamics dominated by the Western states. For both critics and champions of the new secular nationalism, its defining feature is self-determination through a rather narrowly prescribed set of criteria.

Finally, nationalism is a normative system. Under the banner of unity and self-determination, nationalism constructs a framework for ideal configurations of the national moral self. The construction of such a framework requires establishing what are and what are not acceptable features of the national ideal and a regulatory moral code that naturalizes behaviors of the dominant class and delegitimizes the norms and forms of the subordinate classes. Nationalism arrogates to itself the role of arbiter over who fits the 'silent norm' of the ideal and who does not (Carnegie 2002: 3-4). The framework outlines what physical, intellectual, and spiritual features make up the new ideal. So, for example, according to Hindu reformers and nationalist groups such as the RSS and the Sangh Paravar, India's national ideal is male, Hindu, and middle-class. The ideal sits in the middle of a spectrum of possibilities and cultural and ethnic configurations. The farther away one sits from the center the less status and thus rights one has as a citizen of the state. A Jain then, rests close enough to the center and might only experience minor, if any, marginalizing effects. Muslims, on the other hand, routinely experience marginalization as members located at an extreme end of the spectrum. For critical scholars of nationalism such normative practices signal a new form of hegemony and political oppression that give rise to a class of disempowered subalterns (Spivak 1994). Champions of nationalism, on the other hand, regard normative discourses of nationalism

as necessary steps to collective prosperity, however regrettable the dispossession of some of the state's members may be. Whether nationalism as a normative system is hegemonic or an essential feature of national consciousness, both liberal and conservative observers stress the fundamental presence of normalizing discourses.

In briefly outlining a few prominent strands of nationalist discourse what I hope to do is demonstrate the problem of applying the concept in a diasporic community where the historical and social-political landscape differ drastically from the motherland. To return to some of the questions posited earlier, we might ask what interpretive purchase is to be gained by understanding the behavior and practice of diasporic Hindus, particularly those in Trinidad, as nationalist. Though some, or even many, of the elements described by the two dominant discourses are present in a group's approach to self-determination, is it the same thing as what scholars observe in the homeland? In the case of Hindu Trinidad I would argue that the sentiment of the vast majority of Hindus is not one of nationalism. Loosely following Anderson (1991) we might call it 'creole nationalism', but even in that case I would do so with numerous reservations³. Hindus in Trinidad have unquestionably picked up many features of the well-documented nationalist movements in India, of which Hindu Trinidad is purportedly an heir. The turn toward bhakti worship, clear strands of anti-Islamic rhetoric (though many participate in Hosay, an Islamic festival

³ Anderson touches on the rise of nationalism in the American colonies to promote his thesis of print-capitalism determinism. Creole nationalism here refers to the construction of a national sentiment in many of the American colonies, particularly the Spanish ones, by Europeans born in the colony. These creoles were regarded by 'pure' Europeans as having assumed the racial taint of the natives. Creole nationalism then is more an outcome or product of an empowered colonial class rather than a descriptor of a type of nationalism. However, as Anderson points out, the creole class's success at forging a strong nationalist movement, which included the indigenous, is testament to a differently conceived kind of nationalism (1981: 49-50).

[Korom 2003] and express solidarity with other Indo-Trinidadians), the voracious appetite for Indian popular culture, and the welcoming of Hindu missionary groups, would seem to indicate the presence of an exported Hindu nationalism. Yet the historical and contemporary context is markedly different than in India where different pressures engender different social-political processes. Hindu Trinidadian orientation toward the prescribed forms and expressions of Hindutva is altered enough that we must ask if it is still meaningful to interpret them as nationalists. The centerpiece of this exploration and problematization is the concept of Hindutva and its tenuous history in Trinidad. In order to understand this problem further in its Trinidadian context, the history of Hinduism and its link to the larger Trinidadian culture must be explored.

New World Nationalism: The Problematic of a Creole Hinduism in Trinidad

Like Hindus in India, New World Hindus faced a host of threats to their valued traditions, some more ominous than those faced on the sub-continent. The history of Hinduism in Trinidad began as, and remained for several decades, a tenuous proposition (Klass 1961; Jha 1985; Singh 1985; Laurence 1985). Indians that survived the treacherous journey over the *kalam pani*, the dark waters, were sent straight to the plantations to begin their labors. Of the roughly 140,000 Indians to land in Trinidad, few were of priestly caste. Most were common laborers, culled from sugar and other agricultural production regions in India such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Bengal. Like their African predecessors, Indians attempting to preserve their religious practices did so in the highly idiosyncratic fashions endemic to their regions and homes in India (Ramdin 2000). Without the benefit of community cohesion and the consistency of practice such an environment promotes,

Hindu Indians made do with what they had. Diverse practices particular to different regions meant that Trinidad's new Hindu community would have to accept certain compromises in their interpretations and religious practices if they wished to preserve their religion in the New World. The many historical and cultural fragments of India would have to be assembled in a way that was agreeable to the diverse community, and this would have to be done in a labor-intensive environment where the first priority was always the plantation. In addition to time constraints Hindu laborers wishing to establish a viable community of worshipers had to do so in a social environment hostile to polytheism. Distance from India, limitations of time and space for building the new diasporic community, and an unwelcoming social environment replete with Christian missionaries all conspired to undermine the prominence of Hinduism in the lives of Trinidad's Indian laborers (Vertovec 2010).

In her historically rich ethnography *Callaloo Nation*, Aisha Khan chronicles changing colonial attitudes toward Hinduism starting from the 18th century to the height of imperial hegemony in the 19th (2004: 38). What started as fascination with Hinduism's colorful imagery and theological sophistication soon gave way to horror over its gaudy and often grotesque images and its penchant for superstition. Colonialists taking note of the culture patterns and religious practices of their laborers regarded Hinduism in much the same way they had viewed West African Orisha practice (Scher 1997: 322; Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 2003: 27; Stewart 2004); both were expressions of a less advanced spirituality whose followers placed their faith in false idols. Adopting a Malthusian worldview, the idolatry the Christians witnessed was a causal agent, missionaries believed, of Indians' misfortune and degraded state. Though little could be done about

Hinduism in India, where locals had more autonomy to repudiate Christian imperialism, the West Indies was open ground. Thus, Christian conversion loomed as a constant threat to Hindu laborers. Plantation owners, typically indifferent to the religious persuasion of their workers (see Turner 1998), deferred to missionaries who sought to claim Indian souls from the clutches of paganism. The task of converting the Indians fell to the Canadian Presbyterians, who accepted the task with gusto.

When Indians first began arriving to Trinidad in 1845 few had long-term designs in their new host country. Indenture contracts were for five years, a length of time sufficient to save money to bring home to India. Contract renewal, a program vigorously pushed by plantation owners, allowed for another term of five years. But even among those renewing their contracts few did so with the intent of permanently settling in Trinidad (Brereton 1985). The harsh labor conditions, distance from home, and the alien environment reconfirmed for most Indians that home was India. Historical accounts of the early indenture period paint a grim picture of Indian communities surrounding the plantations. Villages were packed with small homes filled to capacity by large families. Sanitation in the villages was abysmal. Violence between Indians, including the infamous wife murders, was rampant⁴. Malnourishment and disease debilitated astonishing numbers of Indians. And education, whether in Hindi, Bhojpuri, or English, was virtually non-existent (on the squalid conditions of Indian villages see Brereton 1985; Haraksingh

⁴ The much remarked upon wife murders of the early indenture period were the result, it is presumed, of the skewed male to female ratio of as high as 4:1 at one point. Thus women were in a unique position of agency and men were desperate. The theory goes that men, ever vigilant against the threat of infidelity, would kill their wives before letting another man take her from his home (see Brereton 1985: 26; Niranjana 2006: 69-84; in British Guiana see Mangru 2006: 211-228; on the overall increase of violence in Trinidad due to the gender imbalance see Trotman 1986: 153-154).

1985; 2006; Williams 1981). By the late 1860s the first Canadian Presbyterian missionaries had arrived, primarily to address the indentured community's education needs, and, in the process, undermine the authority of the tenacious Hindu complex.

In 1868 the Canadian Presbyterian Mission, founded by John C. Morton, established formal schools for Indo-Trinidadians. The Presbyterian schools were the first to offer the Indian migrants sustained exposure to academic education in Trinidad. By 1900 the Mission operated 60 Presbyterian schools in Trinidad, mostly in the Indo-Trinidadian rural areas. Between 1892 and 1900 the Canadian Presbyterian Mission opened three colleges for the training of Indo-Trinidadian instructors, inspired as much by goodwill as the conversion of the Indians (Campbell 1985: 117-118). As Campbell (1985: 118) notes, such a rapid pace of Christian expansionism was unusual in the British Caribbean, even though Anglicans, Baptists, and, to a lesser degree, Quakers, have long been visible members of its cultural landscape (Turner 1998). Indians did convert to Presbyterianism in the early stages, evidenced by, among other things, the contemporary presence of Canadian Presbyterian schools and churches operated primarily by Indo-Trinidadians⁵. Because the colonial administration was reluctant to address the education

⁵ The conversion rate remains fairly low. Of the approximately 400,000 Indo-Trinidadians on the island 86 % are Hindus and about 8% Muslim. The other 6% are Christian of one stripe or another or without religion altogether. Despite the relative unpopularity of the church, the Canadian Presbyterians maintain an active presence in Indo-Trinidadian communities. The education they provide is their most obvious contribution, which many Indo-Trinidadians continue to take advantage of without converting. One parent of a Ramlila participant shared stories with me of attending Canadian Presbyterian schools as a child. By his anecdotal observations few of the Hindus he knew converted, despite the persistent and creative religious education they received. Ironically, the parent knows virtually no Hindi or Bhojpuri but could sing the Sunday school classic *Jesus Loves Me* in flawless Hindi, taught to him by his Presbyterian instructors. After he sang the tune for me he smiled and shrugged, as if to say, 'I know my Christianity as well as any other Christian, but I'm a Hindu for life.'

needs of the growing Indo-Trinidadian community, Indians benefited greatly by the Christian schools, even though their overall conversion rate was, at least for the Presbyterians, disappointingly low. One of the many obstacles confounding conversion efforts was not necessarily the tenacity of Hinduism (however that can be assessed) or an emergent diasporic nationalism. The Mission's implicit belief in the cultural, and by extension racial, superiority of their instructors and headmasters instigated conflict and power struggles within the organization. The Mission's reluctance to train Indians for posts as headmasters, while logically consistent with their aims, generated widespread disaffection in the early 20th century. In response Indians began scraping together resources to build their own Hindu schools and requesting both financial and instructive help from the growing number of Hindu preservation and promotion groups in India. Christian proselytizing then threatened Hindus from early in the indenture period and remained a specter until community leaders and Hindu missionaries could establish independent schools.

Hindu schools began springing up in the countryside by the end of the 19th century. Supported by community advocacy groups called *panchayats* and by missionaries from India hoping to preserve Hinduism from the onslaught of Western cultural imperialism, Hindu schools promoted an Indo-centric curriculum that included language study in Hindi, devotional religious practice, and scriptural study. Since government support for Hindu and Muslim denominational schools was not to develop until the 1930s and 40s, and even then sparingly, Indian communities had to rally resources and rely on Hindu missionaries for what little they could procure (Campbell 1985). Hindu reformers and preservationists, eager to promote their brand of

interpretation and practice, sent emissaries to the growing Indian community in the Caribbean. Groups such as the Arya Samaj, the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha, and later the Chin Maya Mission, helped construct *mandirs* and schools that would serve as platforms for promoting their nationalist causes. Texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Ramayana* assumed increasing importance as the Hindu community sought out narrative scripture encapsulating their exilic experience (Vertovec 2001). Exiled from India and largely isolated from the rest of Trinidad on and around the plantations, Hindu Indians found solace and inspiration in the *Ramayana*. As I will explore in later chapters, the centrality of the *Ramayana* among Trinidadian Hindus has much to do with their history both in India and overseas, and, most importantly, the way in which they interpret their history.

To gain a sense of how central the *Ramayana* has been in the public imaginary of Hindu Indo-Trinidadians, it is worth mentioning the isolationism experienced by the indentured laborers. Indian settlements were far removed from the urban and administrative areas of Trinidad and were thus easy to ignore for the colonial government. The rigors of plantation life allowed for few of the luxuries afforded the leisure classes such as community development programs, settlement planning, and sanitation systems. This situation not only contributed to the squalor already mentioned but exacerbated feelings of isolation and exile. Plantation owners tirelessly schemed ways to keep their indentured workers near the plantations, including drafting convoluted laws written only in English whose violation meant jail and automatic contract renewal (Brereton 1985: 24), lowering the age of sexual consent to allow for more births per family (Trotman 1986: 180), and the promotion of land acquisition programs that gave

laborers enough land to induce them to stay in Trinidad but small enough that their crop yields would not compete with plantation production (Laurence 1985: 95-114). As scholars have duly noted, the settlement patterns arranged on and around the plantations generated spatial and social-cultural isolation from the broader Trinidadian society. It is within this sense of isolation, of exile, both from India and later from the administrative and cultural center of Trinidad, that Hindus found a parallel history with the *Ramayana*.

The Ramayana: The Epic and Epic Narrations of Nation

On a sultry afternoon Shrutiji, one of the head instructors of the Ram Leela, and I sat outside the Kendra, staring out into the fields still tilled and worked by Indian peasants. Resting on the metal lunch chairs, trying to find solace in whatever puff of wind came our way, we discussed the *Ramayana* and its centrality in Hindu Trinidad. While the *Bhagavad Gita* maintains an important place in the lives of Trinidadian Hindus, its prominence, compared with the *Ramayana*, is noticeably smaller. I was curious why the *Ramayana*, which struck me as more narrative than instructive, would be the preferred scripture. It seemed to me that the *Gita*, with its emphasis on duty and piety, would occupy a larger place in the collective imagination of Trinidad's Hindus. Mopping her brow with a small white kerchief, Shrutiji explained that the origins of the *Ramayana* played an important role in its popularity. Written by Baba Tulsidas in the 16th century, the *Ramayana*⁶ tells the story of Vishnu's incarnation as Lord Rama whose moral purity,

⁶ The original *Ramayana* was composed by Sage Valmiki, it is believed, in the 5th century BCE. Numerous version of the *Ramayana* abound within India and within the Hindu diaspora. Tulsidas's *Ramayana*, called the *Ramacaritamansa*, develops a more *bhakti*, or devotional, approach to Hindu practice. Hindu Trinidadians still refer to the scripture as the *Ramayana*, pronounced simply, 'ra-mine'.

bravery, and skill would restore order in a world made chaotic and violent by the demon King Rawana and his destructive minions, the Rakshasas. Composed in the sugar-producing region of Uttar Pradesh, the *Ramayana* describes Lord Rama's struggles against the forces of adharma (unrighteousness) that would undo Hindu dharma. Rama is then forced into exile from Ayodhyakan, the kingdom of his father. Rama's exile from Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh mirrors the exile experienced by Trinidad's Hindus. The long history of sugar production in the region made it a popular spot for *arkatis* (recruiters) to enlist plantation laborers for many of Europe's sugar facilities throughout the world (Ramdin 2000). For many of Trinidad's Hindus, the underhandedly coercive techniques deployed by the arkatis and the powerfully disruptive forces of Western imperialism remind them of the struggles Rama faced away from a home he was forced to leave. Like destructive Rakshasas, arkatis, minions to larger colonial powers, disbanded communities and disrupted lives for their own benefit. Lord Rama's resilience in the face of tragedy – the abduction of his wife by Rawana, his exile from Ayodhya, the destruction caused by the demons – and the uncertainty he faced in his quest to restore the dharma, stand as testament to the moral power of Hindu dharma. As Shrutiji repeatedly explained to me and to her class, "Vishnu took avatar as Sri Ram to offer us an example of how we are to live our lives." Of all Rama's qualities, it is his steadfast devotion to dharmic morality that affords him his success against outside forces attempting to disturb the mind and divide communities. What Rama offers is an example of the ways in which dharmic practice, *sadhanas*, can empower individuals and strengthen communities even in the midst of centrifugal social forces.

The *Ramayana* of Baba Tulsidas (Figure 3) then is more than mere scripture for many of Trinidad's Hindus, it is an integral part of their history. From ancient Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh to the present in Chaguanas, Trinidad, the *Ramayana* captures the sentiment of a particularly situated people and symbolizes their relationship to the divine. As sacred text it inaugurates a devotional turn in worship practice. As historical text it narrates the story of an agrarian community and their steadfast devotion to Rama and their relationship to the dharma. Observers have noted that the centrality of texts such as the *Ramayana* and the *Bhagavad Gita* within the Hindu diaspora developed alongside a simplified devotional Hindu practice called *bhakti* yoga. The rise of *bhakti* in favor of more complex Vedantic (philosophic) approaches to Hindu spirituality was contemporary with both the rise of colonialism and the subsequent emergence of transnational Hindu communities. Because *bhakti* facilitates communal services around a single theme or passage, much as sermons function for Christians, it is much easier to cultivate a sense of common purpose. A consistent weekly message, centered around a common text and explored communally, offered indentured Hindus a message of hope and a means for interpreting their struggles. As I will explore in later chapters, interpretations of and relationships with the *Ramayana* are highly contingent processes that rely as much on contemporary cultural features as historical precedent.



Figure 3. Baba Tulsidas

The history of Hindus in Trinidad and their contemporary interpretation of both the broader culture around them and Hindu practice must be understood in light of their relationship to the *Ramayana*. Likewise, that relationship to the *Ramayana*, and all the paradoxes and complexities that that entails, must be understood in light of the contemporary struggles, concerns, and discourses of modern Trinidadian Hindus. In order to understand steadfast Hindu practice in Trinidad as an expression of religious or ethnic nationalism is to overlook important recent shifts in cultural form and practice. Of particular interest in the following chapters are processes of interpretation and subject creation that illustrate the ways in which Hindu Trinidadians negotiate local and global iterations of postmodernity. It is worthwhile then to reconsider several historical changes within the emerging diaspora that prevented a fully nationalistic discourse to emerge among Trinidadian Hindus.

That Hinduism exists in Trinidad in the vibrant fashion it does today is a historical improbability. Historians account for that vibrancy by pointing out, among other things, the geographical isolation of the Indians and the snail's pace by which they were integrated into Trinidadian political and popular culture. It would be impossible to determine whether Hinduism would exist in its current state had Indians been more readily integrated into their new social environment. Given the evidence, however, from throughout the Hindu diaspora, it seems reasonable to conclude that Hinduism would still exist in Trinidad in something like its current robust state. More than a reflexive nationalism, I will argue, kept the Hindu community together throughout the fragmenting process of colonialism, indentureship, and cultural imperialism. While Hindus in India sought to withstand the pressures of colonial modernity through articulating a Hindu essence and thus fixing a Hindu identity, Trinidadian Hindus faced imperialism with creative adaptability. They survived not by cultural monopoly but by bricolage. They assembled the fragments of their old mythological world, as Boas put it, to reassemble a new one in a novel land (see Levi-Strauss 1965: 202). To adapt to the environment around them, however spatially remote they may have been from Trinidad's cultural center, required collecting the fragments of past practice and forging a creole Hinduism. Because Hinduism never held a position of supremacy, never determined normative values for the vast majority of Trinidad's populace, never structured cultural features of the state, Hindus were never in a position to assert authority, to establish truth regimes, or to define a Hindu essence. Undoubtedly, it was abundantly clear to the cast away Hindus that existence precedes essence, to put it in existentialist terms (Sartre 1949). Hinduism

was not simply carried over the *Kalam Pani* to be replanted in the New World. It had to be constructed.

Hinduism was, however, threatened by many of the same forces that threatened it in India. The colonial project, with its emphasis on the efficiency of production and the systematization of labor, dismantled and fragmented cultural frameworks and reordered them with its own logic of capital accumulation (James 1989; Williams 1994). Implicated in processes of Western imperialism was Christianity and missionaryism, uneven, contradictory, and complicated as it was (Turner 1998: 66). Adding to the litany of troubles besetting them, Hindus in Trinidad were also removed from the thrum of ritual and hermeneutic processes that nurture belief and practice. Most of the Hindu Indians arriving in the West Indies throughout the indenture period did so from disparate parts of India and were predominantly of labor, rather than priestly, castes (Brereton 1985). Indentured Hindus, like the African slaves before them, thus had to cobble together a functional model of religious practice from the fragments of interpretations brought to the New World over the *Kalam Pani* (on processes of creolization see Knight 1990; Benitez-Rojo 1998; 2006; Harris 1998; Hall 2007b; Gilroy 1993). The fragments of religious practice and interpretation pieced together over the years following the introduction of Indian indenture did not happen in total isolation. Despite the geographical divide of Indians in and around the plantations in the rural areas and the former slaves moving increasingly to urban areas in search of non-agricultural labor, Indians still had to contend with Trinidad's dominant Christian, Afro-Creole culture. Unlike in India, where Hindus feeling besieged by colonialism, Christianity, Islam, and modernity agitated to maintain social supremacy and religious purity in the form of *Hindutva* (see, for example,

Sarvarkar 2003 [1923]), Hindus in Trinidad attempting to preserve their heritage had to find a means of carving space in the local cultural landscape for themselves. Doing so required not only ingenuity, but a great deal of compromise. The loss of established institutions such as the varna, or caste, system (Vertovec 2010) and Indian languages (Singh 1985; Mahabir: undated) signaled two of the largest compromises Hindu Indians would make settling permanently in Trinidad.

In constructing a creole tradition in the Caribbean, Hindus were, and are, doing what generations of West Indian slaves had done before them. They constructed new logics, new unifying principles, and new imaginative spaces from fragments picked up from the past and from a wholly new present. They became a part of the machinery of modern capitalism in Europe's production colonies of the New World and imbibed the mechanistic logic by which capitalism operates (Benitez-Rojo 2006). Pulled from an indigenous logic into one centered around efficiency, production, and labor, slaves and indentured workers became what Scott has accurately termed "conscripts of modernity" (2005). The jarring shift from communal logics to one of capital accumulation and efficient control, ushered the collapse of a pre-modern lifeway that could only be partially reconstructed. The inherently fragmentary and constructed nature of all knowledge, of all organizing principles and cultural logics, must have been disconcertingly clear to slaves and indentures burdened with the task of fashioning some kind of meaningful culture in the face of such gross imperialism. Trinidadian Hindus, however, had an advantage in several regards. Hinduism was never outlawed in the way many West African polytheistic traditions were (Houk 1995). Despite the idiosyncratic regionalism of Hindu practice and understanding, there was enough similarity within the complex – names of

the devas, puja practice, folktales – to reconstruct a faithful Hinduism. Indentured Hindus, though many of them illiterate in Indian languages and English, had sacred texts, such as the *Ramayana*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Puranas* (stories of the devas), the *Vedas*, and the *Mahabharata*, that could be referenced. And, beginning in the 20th century, they welcomed Hindu missionaries to Trinidad who helped establish mandirs, schools, and interpretive traditions. None of these features, however, either in sum or individually, could prevent the creolization of practice. Hindu Indians had to refashion a coherent logic from whatever elements made sense within the new order, just as the slaves did generations before them.

Throughout the toilsome and disrupting process of indenture and immigration, the *Ramayana* has served as an inspirational text whose message of perseverance, strength, and determination rings true to the experiences of Trinidad's Hindus. The epic journey from India to present-day Trinidad, involving exile, coercion, and destruction is mirrored in the story of Rama and his companions as they work together to restore the dharma and promote peace and prosperity on earth. As Shrutiji explains, "we too are exiles, and must have the discipline to work like our ancestors did." As I will explore in the next section, the use of the *Ramayana* as a central rallying point for the process of cultural construction and community cohesion is part of a West Indian tradition social constructivism.

Caribbean Nationalism: Trinidadian National Identity as Bricolage

Caribbean nationalism is complicated by several features unique to the region. The process of generating a homogenous culture within a creole context has vexed nearly all

Caribbean states. Beleaguering such attempts are problems of cultural pluralism, identity politics (Knight 1990), and what Paul Gilroy has called ‘double consciousness’ (1993). Double consciousness, Gilroy states, is the impossible task of attempting “to face (at least) two ways at once” (1993: 3). His metaphor of facing several directions at once neatly articulates not only the condition of modernity former colonial subjects find themselves in, but also the double bind of state-level nationalist projects throughout the Caribbean. During the independence movements of the 1960s, leaders of the British West Indies had to negotiate the inheritance of colonial political and social structures on the one hand, and an oppositional creole voice calling for autonomy and an indigenously derived social system on the other. The problem leaders of state-level nationalist projects in more ethnically homogenous states like Jamaica, Barbados, and Granada faced was one of finding a suitable nationalist narrative. Narratives of African primordialism, such as those espoused by pan-African nationalists and, later, by leaders of the Black Power movement (Oxaal 1968), risked sounding anti-modern and alienating the sizable Christian populations. Yet failing to draft an indigenous creole ideology risked aligning oneself with the metropole. Nationalist leaders then had to walk a delicate high wire act between modernity (that is, European sophistication) and a creolism that was sufficiently African in its orientation. West Indian political leaders hoping to assume control of the state had to promote an ideology that simultaneously resisted European hegemony while leaving in tact many of the structures, both political and social, European masters were leaving behind. Trinidad’s Eric Williams is a prime example of a state leader who deftly embodied both modernity and an indigenous creole consciousness.

An Oxford educated doctor of history, Williams' political party, the People's National Movement (PNM), began mobilizing in 1956 to assume control of Trinidad and Tobago. By Independence in 1962 Williams was the clear favorite to lead Trinidad into its post-colonial phase. Like his teacher before him, C.L.R. James, Williams was intensely critical of British imperialism and spoke openly of its history of abuses against its colonial subjects (see, for example, Williams 1971; 1981; 1994; James 1989; see also Ryan 2009). Despite his vocal criticism of imperialism, Williams' Oxford education, his sharp erudition and professionalism, and his sophisticated mien, made him the quintessential West Indian creole. Williams' ability to face several directions at once endeared him to Afro-creoles of all classes who regarded him as one who beat the British at their own game⁷. Williams was a professional – always sharp in appearance, articulate in speech, and widely respected among scholars. That Williams' policies did little to ameliorate the poor conditions of many Trinidadians was immaterial to his large and loyal constituency. In the eyes of his allegiant supporters, he was one who achieved success abroad – where he easily could have stayed – and brought his expertise home where he used it to thwart colonialism and rebuild Trinidad. And though he often spoke critically of Trinidad and of Trinidadians, routinely bemoaning the lack of discipline in the country (see Ryan 2009: 315; 538; 544), his reproaches only seemed to earn him

⁷ On this notion of beating the British at their own game see Lazarus' compelling essay *Cricket, modernism, national culture: the case of C.L.R. James*. Lazarus brilliantly captures in this piece the tension surrounding cricket in the West Indies and the ways in which the game served as both technology of social/bodily control and as a medium by which West Indians could defeat the British at their own game. Cricket then is one of many examples of Gilroy's concept of double consciousness. The structure, sentiment, and rules of the game are thoroughly English. Yet, as Lazarus and C.L.R. James () both point out, West Indians expressed themselves through the game in their own idiosyncratic fashion. Put another way, they creolized cricket.

more respect. As Martin, owner of a small guest house I stayed in on my first day in Trinidad, put it, “He never did a damn thing for [Trinidadians], but everybody loved him anyway. He could walk in any neighborhood – Laventille, Beetham Gardens, Dry River⁸– and everybody come out to shake his hand.” When I asked if current Prime Minister at the time Patrick Manning could do that too, Martin laughed and said he wouldn’t even try to go in the first place. When I protested that Manning seemed like a man of the people who spoke plainly, wore casual clothes, and had minimal western ties, Martin replied that that was precisely the problem. “He’s too much like them. He’s not *respectable*. Eric Williams always wore a suit. Everywhere he went.” That Williams “never did a damn thing for them” then mattered little to his followers because he was a modern man *and* a Trinidadian. His adroit handling of double consciousness between European modernity and a subtly infused African creolité⁹(Bernabé et al: 1993) solidified his position as the archetypal West Indian. Williams’ nationalist project spoke to a constituency yearning for the bourgeois ideal yet attempting to do so on its own terms. However, unlike the more ethnically homogenous West Indian states, Trinidad’s nationalist project never settled on an agreeable set of norms, practices, or ideals.

Nationalist projects in pluralistic West Indian nations underscore the contested public space of nationalism itself. Like any identity category, nationalism is never a fixed, totally determined/determining discourse (on the instability of identity categories see Butler 2008). The inherent instability of nationalist ideals however is more

⁸ Areas around Port of Spain renowned for extreme poverty and violence.

⁹ Bernabé et al define creolité as “the interactional or transactional aggregate of Caribbean, European, African, Asian, and Levantine cultural elements, united on the same soil by the yoke of history” (1990: 87).

pronounced in ethnically plural states like Trinidad, Guyana, or Suriname, where primordialist narratives risked alienating large sectors of society. Generating homogeneity from heterogeneity was, and still is, complicated by an immigrant population arriving from different quarters of the globe. Hindu nationalism in India, as we saw, developed a robust primordial discourse by drawing on a common fund of texts, symbols and folklore, and creating around them a regulatory hermeneutic that attempted to homogenize Hinduism's vast diversity of practice. Framers of Hindu nationalism in India could afford, indeed desired, to alienate and marginalize other groups, primarily Muslims, because control of political, economic, and social mechanisms of power was largely Hindu. Hindus in India could also lay claim to ownership of Hindusthan through a continuous 4,000 year occupation of the land, however spurious and logically irrelevant such an argument may be. Architects of state level nationalism in multi-ethnic Caribbean nations could not develop and articulate such evocative imagery. The primordialist narratives and imagery that had so much cultural capital within ethnic groups led to conflict, in some cases violent conflict (Despres 1964; Williams 1993), in the public space of state formation. As Despres argues, the extreme pluralism of a state like Guyana was held together by the thin bond of labor regulation under imperial authority (on the plural society see 1964: 22-29; also Smith 1965: 75-91). Ethnic antagonism never metastasized into violent conflict under Crown rule, Despres argues, because of a regulatory regime that provided a veneer of commonality. As Independence neared, political groups mobilized their ethnic base to assume control of the state apparatus. That political parties congealed under the banner of ethnicity rather than class represents for most Caribbean scholars one of the divisive legacies of colonialism and one of the largest

stumbling blocks to statist nationalisms. As Brackette Williams asserts in her study of Guyanese nationalism, the cultural and political hegemony exercised by European powers throughout the period of colonialism lefts residues that indigenous elites would appropriate upon assuming control of the state (1991: 36).

Williams adopts Gramsci's notion of transformist hegemony to explain how Guyana's cultural elites adopted, like Eric Williams had in Trinidad, an anti-imperial rhetorical platform that ironically kept in place class division. The failure of post-Independence Guyanese leadership was the inability to naturalize these unequal power relations as the Europeans had so successfully done during imperial rule (1991: 36). European domination was as successful as it was, she argues, because of their ability to naturalize class and ethnic divisions. Under a system of well-executed transformist hegemony, Gramsci explains, radical power differentials and unequal access to institutions of class mobility appear to be part of the natural order of things (2009). In Gramsci's model, hegemony can manifest itself as either total domination, as in the case of Western imperialism, or as intellectual and moral leadership. In the case of the latter, which is Williams' concern in Guyana, certain class groups, in the case of Europe it was the middle class, demonstrate an acceptable level of intellectual, moral, and hence political leadership that inspires faith from the masses. Following Marx, as that class assumes social and political power their ideas become the dominant ideas of the whole society (see Marx 1978: 172). Elaborating on Marx's model, Gramsci suggests that the ruling class gains the consent of the masses by making some ideological and aesthetic compromises in the fabrication of social values and mores. In Gramsci's terms, "The bourgeois class poses itself as an organism in continuous movement, capable of absorbing

the entire society, assimilating it to its own cultural and economic level” (2009: 80).

Thus, the state assumes the role not merely of political control but also of educator as the ruling class must also ‘educate consent’. In a transformist hegemony then, the ruling class does not merely forcefully impose its ideology on the masses in a repressive fashion (as in Adorno and Horkheimer’s model 1998: 9¹⁰; 120-167). Rather, through the demonstration of intellectual and moral leadership the ruling class acquires the consent of the proletariat and peasant classes. The problem of state nationalism in Guyana, Williams argues, was precisely the inability of the post-Independence ruling classes to demonstrate the moral and intellectual leadership necessary to inspire confidence and maintain order.

To the extent that hegemonic expansion and legitimation depend on the transformation of the rural agricultural sector in order to increase productivity and, thus, to be able to reward, however unequally, supporting coalitions, the symbolism of ethnicity and its production remains a problematic aspect of the elite stratum’s effort to link political and economic control with moral and intellectual leadership, an accomplishment that Gramsci (1971) identified as an essential condition for transformist hegemonic dominance. (Williams 1991: 37)

The problem of demonstrating the requisite leadership for post-Independence political leaders was especially acute in ethnically plural nations where class considerations were only part of the equation. As Eric Williams was clearly aware, gaining the consent of Trinidadians to lead was not merely an issue of winning favor among the various classes. Rather, given the history of mistrust between Indo- and Afro-Trinidadians, controlling the state apparatus, which is but one feature of a nation’s social architecture, would require nationalist narratives and policies that situated all Trinidadians in solidarity against European imperialism. His task was complicated by the rise of a professional and

¹⁰ For example, on the transition from shamanism to religion, they note that “Magic is utterly untrue, yet in its domination is not yet negated by transforming itself into the pure truth and acting as the very ground of the world that has become subject to it.”

academic class of Indo-Trinidadians chaffing against what they perceived as the cultural and political hegemony of Afro-Creoles. Primordialist nationalism, as we have seen, was untenable, and in the case of Trinidad, the most viable alternative – narratives that situate all Trinidadians as former subjects of empire – also generated controversy and confrontation. Just as Guyana’s post-Independence leaders struggled to inspire confidence throughout the broader population and among various ethnic groups, so too did Trinidad’s PNM struggle to expand its constituency beyond its Afro-Creole base.

Eric Williams’ often awkward attempts to reach out to Indo-Trinidadians typically generated more hostility than solidarity. Indo-Trinidadians, depending on the context, historically have not seen themselves as passive victims of European imperialism. Rather, they tend to emphasize their autonomy within the indenture system and thus regard their history in Trinidad more as one of participation in, and even cooperation with, colonial projects and powers (Kahn 2004; Munasinghe 2001). This interpretation of history, widespread and easily located in Trinidad, confounds one of the few alternatives framers of statist nationalism have in Trinidad. In the absence of a viable primordialism within an ethnically plural Trinidad, and in the face of the failure of solidarity narratives, to what means do political leaders hoping to generate broad public support turn¹¹? As I have argued already and will continue to argue in succeeding chapters, nationalisms in the Caribbean, both statist and ethnic, must draw from a fund of symbols, tropes, metaphors, and narratives that embody Gilroy’s double consciousness. The construction of post-Independence Caribbean societies required the assemblage of fragments brought over

¹¹ The question presupposes, of course, a liberal democracy, excluding dictatorships such as Trujillo’s in the Dominican Republic from 1930-1961 (Crassweller 1966), the Duvaliers’ in Haiti from 1957-1986 (Trouillot 1990) and Castro’s in Cuba from 1959 to the present (Williams 1971).

from Europe, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and those found in the New World. What Trinidad, along with every other Caribbean nation, had at its disposal was a congeries of symbols, cultural forms, narrative logics, and metaphors that, when mobilized, had to tread carefully between colonial resistance and modern containment, cultural autonomy and European appropriation, creative agency and post-Enlightenment logic (see Hall for a similar discussion 2010). It is in light of this complex set of nationalist possibilities that leads Knight to conclude that, “Nothing in the Caribbean is simple” (1990: 309). The problem for West Indian architects of national sentiment and post-Independence political leaders was therefore not simply one of fragmentation, of fitting together meaningful assemblages from the numerous cultural strands surviving in idiosyncratic fashion in every state. Rather, the process of bricolage needed to be done with care toward the narratives that would attempt to bind those pieces together. The ethnic nationalisms that emerged in places like Suriname, Guyana, and Trinidad were already robust traditions by the time Independence came in the early 1960s. State-level nationalists such as Eric Williams in Trinidad, Cheddi Jagan in Guyana, Norman Manley in Jamaica, had to negotiate these insular nationalisms if they were to legitimate their brand of nationalism and assume both political and moral leadership of the country. Furthermore, they had to prove that their leadership was for the benefit of every citizen and not merely their own ethnic group, a task which they failed to do¹².

¹² Space does not permit a meaningful discussion of Caribbean wide nationalist projects such as the failed West Indies Federation. However, it is worth briefly mentioning that the brief life of the Federation (1958-1962) is testament to the obstacles post-colonial regions such as the Caribbean face in forging nationalist sentiments that speak to and address the needs of vast group of nations despite similar historical circumstances.

Evidence for Eric Williams' failed attempts at a state level nationalist project lie in the simple fact that political party affiliation in Trinidad remains stubbornly ethnically based. The Peoples National Movement (PNM) is still widely regarded as the Afro-Creole party. And the United National Congress (UNC) maintains a loyal Indo-Trinidadian constituency. Other parties such as the National Alliance for Reconstruction (NAR), headed since the late 1980s by A.N.R. Robinson, and the Congress of the People (CoP), headed by Winston Dookeran, have attempted to bridge the ethnic divide with limited success. Historically, Caribbean scholars have located the ethnic basis of party affiliation in legacies of colonialism that pitted ethnic groups against each other for scarce state-dispensed resources ((Munasinghe 2003; Niranjana 2006). In the run-up to Independence in Trinidad ethnic groups mobilized political factions to claim seats on the colonially administered Legislative Council. By 1929 the Indo-Trinidadian community had three seats on the Council from which to agitate for community improvement programs (Campbell 1985: 121). The results were mixed. Part of the problem lay in continued antagonism between Afro- and Indo-Trinidadians who struggled to find common cause. However, the late 1920s through the Labour Riots of the 1930s are widely regarded as the high water mark of Afro/Indo relations in Trinidad¹³. The larger problem lay in the administrative practices of the colonial government. The Legislative Council functioned more as a palliative than a true governing body. Naipaul's cynical parody of the mystic masseur whose political activism is ultimately thwarted by a seat on the Council is grounded in reality (2002: 186-207). While the Legislative Council had all

¹³ The Labour Riots and the social events leading up to them that saw greater solidarity between Trinidad's two largest ethnic groups cannot be given exhaustive treatment here. For a more detailed discussion see Thomas 1987.

the trappings of real authority, policy decisions remained in the hands of the Colonial Office and the Privy Council in England until Independence in 1962. The re-emergence of Afro/Indo tensions after the years of solidarity orchestrated primarily by Afro-Trinidadian labor leader Tubal Uriah Butler and Indo-Trinidadian labor leader Adrian Cola Rienzi during the Labour Riots can be located in political processes that situated ethnic groups rather than class groups as the focus of agitation (Jacobs 1987).

The centrifugal forces of colonial administrative practices that divided Afro-and Indo-Trinidadians and pitted them against each other reached a zenith in the mid-1950s when formation of political parties that would assume control of the state emerged. Eric Williams' PNM, formed in 1956, became the principle party of Afro-Creoles, while the Democratic Labour Party (DLP) emerged as the Indian party. Though both parties directed their ire toward the Colonial Office and openly agitated for unity and equality of all Trinidadians, by the late 1950s whatever sentiments of ethnic unity that existed began unraveling (Ryan 2009: 142-3). The politics of mistrust that dominated Afro/Indo relations before the labor solidarity movements of the 1930s returned during the period of Independence, reaching its height of vitriol during the Black Power movement and the peak of PNM power, both in the 1970s¹⁴. The PNM's 25 year grip on political control lasted until 1987 when Robinson's NAR, in a coalition formed with the UNC (formerly

¹⁴ It must be noted that Black Power leaders were some of Eric Williams' and the PNM's most vociferous and implacable critics. As a Pan-African nationalist movement sweeping the Americas, Black Power leaders regarded Eric Williams as a colonial compromiser, too irreparably Western and bourgeois to help restore African greatness in the face of cultural imperialism. Though Black Power agitators did attempt to enlist Indo-Trinidadians to their cause as fellow victims of white imperialism, Indo-Trinidadians wanted none of it, which only exacerbated tensions between the groups.

the DLP), wrested control of government. It was not until 1995 that Indo-Trinidad would see its first leader, Basdeo Panday, step into the role of Prime Minister.

Panday's victory in the polls was a coup for Indo-Trinidadians who believed that it was finally their turn to control government. The long drought of political power was over, and Indo-Trinidadians could now claim their place among the elites of Trinidadian politics. But the victory was both contentious and short lived. Panday was widely viewed as corrupt by many Afro-Trinidadians, which may be a reflection of colonial tendencies toward stereotypes of the 'underhanded', 'dirty' Indian, or may be a reflection of Panday's less than transparent, often questionable, political strategies¹⁵. In all likelihood it was a combination of both. Panday's victory nearly set off riots in Afro-Trinidadian quarters of the state. It is common Trinidadian knowledge that elections typically bring out the worst in Afro/Indo relations. Many Trinidadians have described the ebb and flow of 'racialist' (racist) rhetoric that heats up during elections then dissipates shortly after the votes are tallied. Panday's election was different. Afro-Trinidadians feared that Panday, who they regarded as a savvy power broker, would serve only the needs of his Indo-Trinidadian community, treating resources of the state as spoils to be divvied up between his loyal followers. Though many Indo-Trinidadians shared some of the broader populace's concerns, even if not nearly as vocally, the simple fact that they had

¹⁵ I should add that a fair amount of Indo-Trinidadians also had reservations about Panday. After he lost his seat as Prime Minister in 2000 due to corruption charges the UNC tried to expel him from the party with little success. After nine years of wrangling Panday was finally removed as head of the party, replaced by the widely popular Kamla Persad-Bissessar.

engineered a national victory signaled their arrival as fellow architects of Trinidadian social and political life.

As both Prime Minister and the face of a new era in Trinidadian social and political life, Basdeo Panday proved to be a radically polarizing figure. His platitudes about serving all Trinidadians rang as hollow for Afro-Trinidadians as Eric Williams' had for Indo-Trinidadians. Panday's political savvy, coupled with his sharp tongue and often eccentric political tactics made him an easy target for, and exemplar of, tenacious stereotypes of the underhanded, self-serving Indian. Just as Eric Williams had represented the essence of Afro-Creolité so too did Panday represent Indianness. Panday's efforts at bridging Trinidad's intractable ethnic divide failed for the same reasons Eric Williams' had. Both came from separate spheres of Trinidad's cultural landscape, leading to concerns that each was in office to serve his own community's needs rather than the whole of Trinidad's. The degree to which these anxieties were justified is not of interest here. More to the point, what I wish to underscore is the sentiment of mutual distrust that has permeated Trinidadian politics and which has prevented a meaningful statist nationalism from emerging. Panday could no more generate a feeling of national unity than Eric Williams could not simply because he was Indian or Eric Williams Afro-Creole. Rather, the problem for both leaders was that they were seen as embodying cultural mores, values, aesthetics, and logics, that have long been associated with either Indo-Trinidadianness or Afro-Trinidadianness. Racial discursive regimes inherited from imperial knowledge categories unquestionably play a significant role in this historical trend, but those regimes are neither totally determined nor totally determining. What I would like to argue here and in succeeding chapters is

that the monolith of colonial racial discourse is showing cleavages in certain areas of Trinidadian cultural life. Trinidad, as with all other nations, is changing rapidly. The racial essentialisms upon which colonial knowledge categories were built are less overt than in times past, nuanced by claims of cultural difference and symbolic diversity and overshadowed by concerns stemming from beyond Trinidad's borders.

For members of the Kendra, as with many other Hindus in Trinidad, the preservation and maintenance of Hinduism is less about competition for and control of state resources. Expressions of ethnic nationalism that would assert cultural and racial aptitude for state control and moral leadership are giving way to concerns about competing in a highly uncertain, Western dominated global market. As the following chapters will describe, in nearly every interview and in numerous observations of class discussions and organized educational activities, the most dominant theme was one of market competition. This is not to say that political hegemony has been totally forgotten. In the years leading up to Kamla Persad-Bissessar's historic election, Indo-Trinidadians openly lamented their long run of political futility, insisting that it was their turn to run government. But the position of such concerns is not as central as in times past, particularly since the election of Kamla and the erosion of PNM dominance. The next chapter will consider the question of interpretation and the ways in which many Trinidadian Hindus interpret scripture in light of broader global-social concerns.

CHAPTER IV

SUBJECT CREATION, DISCIPLINE, IDENTITY FORMATION

The cynicism of the politician whose premise was that “in politics anything goes” had penetrated deeply into the psychology of the masses.

~ Selwyn Ryan, *Eric Williams: The Myth and the Man*

In the expression “Islamic government,” why cast suspicion immediately on the adjective “Islamic”? The word “government” by itself is enough to awaken one’s vigilance.

~ Michel Foucault, *Open Letter to Mehdi Bazarga*

In her book *No Bond but the Law* (2004), historian Diana Paton effectively argues against the notion that humanistic governing strategies emerging in post-Enlightenment Europe shifted British jurisprudence in its Caribbean colonies from one of brutality to temperance. Using Jamaica as a case study, Paton examines the historical record to find that corporeal punishment remained a central feature of colonial punitive measures well after the Slave Emancipation Act was formally instituted in 1838 (2004: 9). Paton’s work seeks to challenge Foucault’s notion of changing governing strategies during the humanistic revolution by asserting that far “from marking a sharp break with strategies of power that inflicted pain on the bodies of subjects, slaveholders and state systems of punishment made direct use of physical violence and the infliction of pain...” (2004: 10). Similar to Jamaica, in Trinidad physical violence, the infliction of pain, and the use of fear were deployed by the island’s first governor, General Picton, as routine strategies of control in an attempt to impose order on a colony he was warned had no discipline and a simmering revolutionary spirit (Cudjoe 2003: 11). This chapter will explore Trinidad’s

historic “lack of discipline”, as Eric Williams put it (Ryan 2009: 149), arguing that the island’s status as an immigrant country lends it its notorious absence of social structure. Furthermore, this lack of structure and discipline are the very features of Trinidadian public culture that give rise to many parents’ anxieties and which animate the Kendra’s efforts to promote discipline and diligence in their students.

The ‘Subversion of Categories’: A Short History of Discipline in Trinidad

Standing trial for charges of torturing an eleven year old mulatto girl named Louisa Calderon, General Thomas Picton, Trinidad’s first governor, and his defense attorney, Robert Dallas, justified the governor’s actions on the grounds that the West Indian context demanded a subversion of the usual rationality and temperance guiding British jurisprudence (Epstein 2007: 721-22). The prosecution argued that the governor’s cruel tactics stood in contrast to the enlightened principles of humanitarianism shaping British law and represented the barbarism and lawlessness rampant in the British Caribbean (Cudjoe 2003: 17). To abolitionists and critics of colonial imperialism, Governor Picton’s actions were emblematic of the kinds of moral and juridical abuses permeating Britain’s overseas labor colonies. For his part, the governor insisted that his disciplinary strategies were no different than what any other colonial governor would do and which is required by the onerous task of imposing order and discipline on an unruly colony. Indeed, General Abercromby, who had given Picton, at the time of his appointment in 1801 a colonel, the keys to Trinidad, impressed upon the new governor his need to keep tight reins on a population tending toward criminality. A wealthy and powerful planter, Christóbal de Robles, reminded the newly appointed governor that England’s conquest of

the former Spanish colony was now largely his to govern as he pleased, advising him that British sovereignty had “virtually combined in you the whole power of the government”, allowing him to ignore conventional “forms or modes of prosecution” (cited in Epstein 2007: 716). The newly appointed governor was warned that Trinidad was an island of desultory cast-about and wayward citizens who worked only when necessary and largely by guile. Governor Picton’s desire to reform Trinidad from a colonial backwater to a crown jewel mixed dangerously with this unfettered rule, his unchecked bravado, and his irascible, almost paranoid, temperament.

Trinidad became Picton’s own fiefdom, which he governed like a tyrant (Brereton 1982). Picton’s governing style was capricious, cruel, and often mercilessly intolerant of anything resembling insubordination. He imprisoned, tortured, and hanged citizens he feared might be conspiring to rebel against him. Petty criminals received punishments well in excess of their minor crimes. At the time of Louisa Calderon’s imprisonment and subsequent torture, five other women were awaiting punishment on crimes of alleged witchcraft and sorcery. Calderon herself was guilty of having conspired with another man to rob her husband of \$2,000. When Calderon refused to implicate her accomplice, Picton ordered her tortured by piquet, a mechanism operated by pulley that lowered a bound prisoner’s foot onto a sharp spike. Governor Picton himself had ordered the use of the piquet in Trinidad, claiming it was the perfect prescription for curing the colony of its lawlessness. Calderon was piqueted twice, once for 54 minutes and a second time for 23 minutes until she revealed the name of her accomplice and the whereabouts of the money.

The “case of Picton and the cause of Louisa Calderon”, as Epstein phrases it, became a rallying point for detractors of colonial excess. William Barrow, leading the prosecution against Picton, stated with chagrin that in his role as representative of the British Crown and as governor of a colony and thus “bound to protect his fellow subjects”, Picton had “disgraced the country to which he was born” and “stained British character” by his actions (cited in Epstein 2007: 719). Garrow went on to explain to the court that though jurisprudence in the colonies is a different matter than in England, Picton’s interpretation and administering of law was unacceptably barbaric. Picton was ultimately found guilty of torture but never sentenced and served no prison time.

For Caribbean literary historian Selwyn Cudjoe, the case of Governor Picton is emblematic of colonial ways of “othering” the subjects of empire both legally and through the construction of local “sensibilities” in written texts (2003: 17). The story of Louisa Calderon, Cudjoe explains, “is a valuable literary and generalized representation of how the newly emerging Trinidadian subject was viewed in this slave society” (2003: 21). For Epstein, Picton’s case and Calderon’s cause evoke questions about gender, race, and class relations, but ultimately about “the uncertainties of colonial rule” (2007: 719). Like Cudjoe, Epstein is intrigued by how the case played havoc with “settled fictions of British identity” as Calderon’s “in-betweenness ramified this subversion of categories” (2007: 724). Like Cudjoe and Epstein I am interested in how cases such as Picton and Calderon’s are exemplary of identity and subject creation strategies, but also in the ways in which the case illustrates the problematization of humanistic governing strategies in the colonial world. The problematization (Rabinow 2003) of revolutionary governing strategies inaugurated in the 19th century that turned toward the creation of subjectivity

and the careful maintenance of class, racial, sexual, and national identity applied not only to the metropolitan powers of Europe but to their colonial subjects as well (Cf. Paton 2004). In Trinidad, however, the conflict between plantation-style punitive measures and new juridical practices emerging from European humanism was compounded by a Creole society becoming ever more so plural as new waves of immigrants began arriving in the mid-19th century. Trinidad's multicultural population, coupled with its enduring cynicism and abiding mistrust of authority made it a particularly troublesome island to govern. Discipline, as I have noted, became the catchword of Trinidad's first Prime Minister, Eric Williams, who feared that without it, Trinidad would be left behind by other Caribbean nations. It did not bode well for Trinidad that the new West Indies Federation refused Chaguaramas, a port town in the north-west, as its capital on the grounds that the island experienced too much corruption (Ryan 2009: 172). For many Hindus of Trinidad, discipline must be integrated into the local communities first, then into the broader national community if the country is to move beyond what they see as its second-class status.

Disciplining Trinidad

In 2007 Patrick Manning, then Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, rolled out what he and his PNM party dubbed "Vision 2020." The Vision was Manning and the PNM's program to bring Trinidad and Tobago into the First World by the year 2020¹. To demonstrate to Trinidadians their commitment to the economic development of the country, Manning and the PNM embarked on a four-town whistle stop tour of Trinidad

¹ The language and phrasing, incidentally, is theirs, taken from numerous speeches I attended and pamphlets collected.

and Tobago. They brought music (a Chutney artist), elaborate slide shows, and top-ranking members of the party, capped by Manning himself, to highlight the country's progress so far under PNM leadership and the progress yet to be made. Large pictures of shiny factories, new government buildings and projects, schools and universities, and new housing projects faded in and out as one speaker after the next touted Trinidad's inevitable rise to First World status. Judging by the pictures and rhetoric, Trinidad was ready to overtake Switzerland any day now as a land of prosperity and discipline. By 2020, Manning told what was by now a sparse and largely disinterested crowd, Trinidad will be respected globally as a member of the First World. Sensing that he was losing his audience to boredom, or fatigue, or perhaps other interests, the Prime Minister began sharply raising his voice every few seconds, sounding more hysterical than emphatic. He reminded his citizens, in a tone that sounded more like reproach than inspiration, that Trinidad will only achieve its goals with the focus and determination of its people. Sadly, his people were not listening, and Manning appeared to be losing his grip. What started out as a pep-rally ended as a rather frustrated reprimanding.

As I stood watching Manning's meltdown in the University of Woodford Square in downtown Port of Spain, the same place Eric Williams had given his history and political lectures to anyone who cared to listen and for which the modifier "University" was added to the square's name, I wondered if Manning was now feeling the same sense of frustration and futility Williams had as he tried to "discipline" Trinidad. The event underscored for me the difficulty of a nationalist project in Trinidad and explained why many groups, especially many Hindus, who fear that Trinidad's general educational and

economic environment is not sufficiently competitive, turn to their own resources to foster discipline and competitive professionalism in their members.

A continual refrain among Trinidad's Hindus is the voicing of concern over the spiritual influence of broader Trinidadian culture on their youth. What Sat Maharaj, President of Trinidad's largest Hindu organization the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha Society, has referred to as the 'culture of the extended Carnival', goes by many euphemisms, several of them geographical – the North, the East-West corridor – others operating as group signifiers – Trini culture, carnival culture, Soca. Encountering thinly veiled references to the spiritually and thus socially disruptive Afro-Trinidadian culture is as commonplace as pan music. Whether in public statements such as Sat Maharaj's or in casual conversation, Hindus routinely express anxiety about the allure that the carefree 'culture of the extended carnival' will hold for their children. The exegesis of this anxiety, and its various iterations, yields numerous readings. Historically we may read the Indo-Trinidadian struggle for inclusion and empowerment from a marginal position in Trinidadian politics and cultural production. Additionally, we might also note, as nearly all scholars of Indo-Afro-Trinidadian relations have, the vestiges of colonial racial discourses that continue to prompt essentialist stereotypes of Afro-Trinidadians as people motivated largely by lust and revelry (in addition to already cited scholars in this discourse, for example Munasinghe 2001; Brereton 1985; Khan 2004; and Niranjana 2006; see also Rampersad's Sunday Express article "Why we lie about each other" 2007). In a more contemporary context, readings of Hindu concern over the social dominance of Afro-Trinidadian culture may also yield evidence of a tenacious Hindu nationalism that situates Hinduism as a tradition of inquiry, erudition, and discipline. From this

interpretation one may read the urgent need of an anxious Hindu community attempting to keep its tradition intact in the face of dilution or even annihilation.

The purpose of this chapter is to problematize these well-mined readings. I would like to problematize these readings not because I believe they are inaccurate or wrong-headed in any way. Quite the opposite. Narratives of concern over Afro-Trinidadian cultural influence are racist rehearsals of colonially derived truth regimes. They are linked to anxieties about inclusion and community empowerment. And they are expressions of cultural nationalism. But they are not any one of these alone. In some contexts, uttered by certain individuals they may be. But taken collectively they express all of these concerns as well as others that have not been so thoroughly explored.

Borrowing a term from Raymond Williams (1984) the narratives of concern can be viewed as a 'convergence' of numerous historical and contemporary discourses. What I would like to explore here is the contemporary concern of Hindu Trinidadians with competition in the local and global capitalist market. In the last chapter I explored Raviji's declaration that he is a Hindu nationalist, interrogating what such a statement could mean in a creole context such as Trinidad in particular and within the West Indies more generally. What I would like to explore here is Raviji's later claim that he is "not a preservationist", but rather "an innovator." Why is Trinidad, as Raviji confessed to me, "a better place to be a Hindu than India"? The aim of this chapter then is to argue that contemporary forms and practices of Hindu subject creation are in response to and animated by more global concerns about marketplace competition and capital efficacy. The rigid nationalisms of India that strive to fix Hindu practice and interpretation give way in Trinidad to more fluid religious expressions and are therefore regarded as more

cosmopolitan and more modern. I would like to explore in this section theories that attempt to understand how subjectivity is constructed, shaped, and determined in order to argue first that subject determining forms are negotiable and thus partially indeterminate, and second that the fluidity of identity in Trinidad renders claims of ethnic nationalism as a response to discursive hegemony problematic.

Subjectivity, Identity, and Identification

My concern in this section is to identify and analyze how the public space of modern global capitalism – consumerism, representation, temptation – is negotiated by a community often easily labeled locally and in the scholarly canon as ethnic/religious nationalists. The Hindu communities I worked with in Trinidad are motivated not simply by some archaic brand of preservationism but rather by a longing for control over the intellectual and spiritual shape of their children. These communities are engaged in processes beyond merely trumpeting their historical/cultural successes in a bid for scarce state dispensed resources (Khan 2004: 18; 52). Rather, they are deeply concerned with maintaining the power to determine the intellectual contours and moral direction of their children in the face of global and local popular cultures that they paradoxically view as spiritually disruptive and full of temptation on the one hand, and yet as a space in which they wish compete in as equals with the West on the other. It is worth reiterating that Trinidadian Hindus, as with many other groups around the world (many religious but others less so) harbor feelings of ambivalence toward modernity – they are consumers of it, often excitedly so, and yet they also worry about its effects on their children and wish to retain control over the parameters by which subjectivity is shaped. The loop does not

stop there though as one of the principle reasons for maintaining control of subjectivity is so that their kids will succeed within the complex and competitive space of modernity. Thus, I will outline here a few salient theories of subject creation in order to preface my argument that the colonial governmentality of Trinidad, such as it was, has been both accommodated and renegotiated as transnational ideas, ideologies, and possibilities have emerged. To phrase the problem in Stuart Hall fashion, the only recourse by which to engage colonial discursive hegemony is not simply to generate or fall back on ethnic nationalism and racial essentialism. Rather, other possibilities can be and often are to reinterpret, reimagine, and reconfigure that hegemony in an attempt to forge new possibilities (Hall 2010; also Appadurai 2006; Gilroy 1993).

Throughout his voluminous work, Foucault outlines the ways in which control of populations has shifted from that of sovereign power to the more subtle workings of control of the body through juridical-medical-scientific discourse. The scientific revolution, and later the bourgeois revolution, inaugurated new means of population control that operated through the creation of discursive categories that functioned as ‘regulatory regimes’ (Foucault 1995). The turn from territorial control of the sovereign powers to bodily control under the bourgeois regimes meant an emphasis on shaping subjectivity, or what has been referred to as the ‘conduct of conduct’ (Foucault 1991: 100). Europe’s changing cultural logic from one of feudalism to a capitalist one required a new citizenry. It was no longer sufficient to simply police a territory, or a boundary, but rather to police the very activity of the individual body itself and the uses to which it was put. Bodies needed to be efficient, orderly, properly maintained, and appropriately employed. Control of the body, however, could not be repressive. Repressive control,

Foucault points out (following Althusser 1995: 112), is one of repeated negations, which is an untenable practice of power. Control of the body then had to emerge through juridical-medical discourse that regulated care of the self (Foucault 1990a 115-131; 1990b: 25-32). Whole categories of sexual, emotional, psychic, and behavioral conduct articulated proper care of the self and delineated the pathological from the acceptable, the abnormal from the normal, the deviant from the citizen.

Through the sciences of the body and of the self emerged novel forms of subject creation. Unlike the structuralists before him – Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Durkheim – who posited that meaning was made relationally, Foucault argued that knowledge categories did far more than shape meaning. Rather, discursive categories functioned as truth regimes that determined subjectivity itself. Subject determination, though never fully complete (Foucault 1990: 101), is a product of the limitations and foreclosures of knowledge that circumscribe the imaginable. This is not to say that the way in which the self can be imagined is necessarily predetermined, but rather to emphasize that the discursively derived norms structure, and thus limit, the range in which the subject may self-determine, a problem I take up in more detail below in the discussion of Judith Butler. The question of agency in this system then is one that must be interrogated if we are to understand how Hindu subjectivity in Trinidad is negotiated.

In Foucault's model subject determination is a product and project of power. Power, Foucault asserted, is the animating force of discourse, by which the subject is determined. Foucault remained cagey about both power and its ability to completely determine subjectivity. In his famous Method chapter of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault outlines the salient features of power, prefaced by an insistent plea

of how we should not view power and its functions. After establishing that power is not top down subjugation, subservience, or repression he offers this:

It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the *multiplicity of force relations* immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies. (1990: 92-93, emphasis added)

We can conclude from this statement, paradoxical and contradictory as it seems, that power is not a single thing, force, event, or property. It is not like a commodity to be owned and wrested from one group to another as each seeks control of others. Power is the field of force relations itself. It is the territory, or social space, within which the multiplicity of actors, or force relations, interact, compete, resist one another, and struggle. Power is not the sole property of any one agent or group within this ‘sphere’, but rather the sphere itself as constituted by the force relations. As Foucault puts it, “the rationality of power is characterized by tactics” whose authorship may forever remain anonymous (1990: 95). It is essential to note for a later discussion of colonial subject creation that resistances to power are never external. All resistances and struggles against power occur within it, as a part of it, as a product of the same rationalities that shaped it. “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (1990:95). It would appear then that power is ultimately determining. Put another way, the subject is always/already determined by power and as such cannot resist power from a position outside of it. If this is so, how do we address questions of agency? For example, how are we to understand

processes such as interpretation, dialecticism, reinvention in such a model? Is power both local and global? How far does the sphere extend? Are there remote boundaries, interstices, or locations and contexts where the reach of power within the sphere is weaker? Before addressing these questions and the question of operationalizing this model in a colonial and post-colonial context, I would like to consider one more iteration of Foucault's understanding of power.

In a lecture he agrees is pretentiously titled "Omnes et Singulatum: Toward a Critique of Political Reason" delivered at Stanford University, Foucault is at his Nietzschean best tracing the genealogy of political control in Europe from pastoralism to the political state (1994). The piece is somewhat rambling and unpolished but interesting for its study of metaphors of control – i.e., the pastoralist keeping watch over every member of his flock versus the political sovereign simply keeping unity among a state's members. Each type of control operates from its own rationality of power, the former from a Judeo-Christian logic of individual care (as expressed by Yahweh), and the latter from a logic of technocratic maintenance. In either case, power, and the logic and rationality by which it is deployed, is part of "the art of government". In this lecture Foucault offers what is arguably his most direct definition of power.

Power is not a substance. Neither is it a mysterious property whose origin must be delved into. Power is only a certain type of relation between individuals. Such relations are specific, that is, they have nothing to do with exchange, production, communication, even though they combine with them. The characteristic feature of power is that some men can more or less *entirely determine* other men's conduct – but never exhaustively or coercively. A man who is chained up and beaten is subject to force being exerted over him, not power. But if he can be induced to speak, when his ultimate recourse could have been to hold his tongue, preferring death, then he has been caused to behave in a certain way. His freedom has been subjected to power. He has been submitted to government. If an individual can remain free, however little his freedom may be, power can subject him to government. There is no power without refusal or revolt. (1994: 324)

Here Foucault is clear about the practice of power – some people may indeed wield it against others in order to “entirely determine other men’s conduct”. This definition is in keeping with *Discipline and Punish* (1995) where Foucault illustrates the material connections of power as Europe shifted from feudalism to capitalism, a shift requiring new organizational logics and an efficient, well-ordered, even well-bred population (see, specifically, his chapter *Docile Bodies*, 135-69). The citation above, as with his other definitions, posits refusal, revolt, resistance, as essential components of power. Power is not the isolated incidence of control, nor is it the act of refusal, but rather it is the entire field itself in which this control is enacted in the presence of numerous other forces. Yet despite the presence of these resistances and refusals, power ultimately determines the subjects within its sphere. If resistance and refusal occur within the terrain of power and not as external forces, how are we to understand something like colonial, creole societies in the West Indies? In other words, in pluralistic societies where for centuries the dominant governing system was *force* rather than power, how do we operationalize Foucault’s model? Even supposing the ontologic project of post-Enlightenment governmentality was “entirely determined”, which in itself poses numerous problems, how effective was such a program in Europe’s overseas colonies? Is not the very descriptor ‘creole’ itself evidence that subject determination in the Americas had limited success? I want to be careful here not to overstate my case by emphasizing agency over and above discursive hegemony. Plenty of studies exist already anyway that colorfully describe the many creative resistances enacted by colonial subjects (Herskovits 1947; Price 1996; Mintz 1989). To be clear, this study is less an analysis of the power/agency

binary and more an inquiry into what happens to those discursive forms as they are read, interpreted, and refashioned in a religious community that was once a subject of empire and which studies, in its own fashion, various forms of hegemony.

Several anthropologists working in the field of colonialism and post-colonialism have taken up Foucault's project by interrogating imperial technologies of control through the lens of governmentality. Anthropologists of governmentality have examined the ways in which colonial regimes instituted policies concerned not so much with practices of force but with technologies of human control and the conducting of conduct (Inda 2005: 3-11). Central to this project is the examination of the productivity of power and the changing role of the colonial state from one of force and repression to one of paternalism and education. The anthropology of colonial governmentality at its core is a consideration of the state as a cultural locus that both determines and is determined by the society in which it operates (see, for example, Ferguson and Gupta 2005). Other studies employ Foucault's insight into rationalities and technologies of discipline, such as the widely cited use of panopticism. Redfield, for example, examines the use of panopticism in European penal colonies in order to demonstrate how technologies of control kept the incarcerated docile and disciplined (2005: 50-79). Linking anthropologies of modernity and coloniality is the changing face of imperialism and the turn toward humanism that heralded a shift in technologies of subject control, discipline, and punishment. Similar to studies of imperial hegemony, scholarship of the modern colonial state concentrates on the productivity of power in its ability to enact disciplinary measures through discourse

rather than force². But to what degree was the colonial state capable of determining their subjects? Was the humanistic project of scientific discourse and knowledge of the self as productive in the West Indies as it was in Europe? Did the Caribbean, or any of Europe's colonies, constitute part of the sphere of modern discursive power? Can we consider the resistances, refusals, and revolutions on the part of colonial subjects elements in the field of force relations that make up power? Or are we to consider the West Indies, with its emphasis on the use of force and power in conjunction as its own sphere of power? Finally, how do we treat the question of Caribbean subjectivities in the face of colonial power and its hybrid creolization? Borrowing heavily from Judith Butler's articulation of subjectivity, I will argue that the West Indian colonies operated at the margins of European power where, as Baudrillard would have it, the territory itself, not the schematic of it, began to fray and tatter (2000).

The Contingency of Subjectivity

To return to some of the questions posed earlier I would like to ask: Is power both local and global? How far does the sphere extend? Are there remote boundaries, interstices, or locations and contexts where the reach of power within the sphere is weaker? Using Trinidad as a case study, I propose as a preliminary response to these questions that the reach of British governmentality was indeed severely limited, even as imperial logics of subjectivity were imposed through numerous forms of education (Lazarus 1999). The question of the degree to which European hegemony determined its colonial subjects remains a contested one. As post-colonial theorist Anibal Quijano (2008; see also

² For a powerful rejoinder to this argument using evidence from colonial Jamaica see Paton 2004.

Mazzotti 2008) has rightly pointed out in his articulation of *coloniality*, western cultural logics, based principally on capital accumulation, radically reordered indigenous logics throughout the world. In so doing, the West refashioned the entire global order in its own image. Quijano, following the lead of numerous scholars of colonialism, goes on to examine the points of resistance and refusal of indigenous peoples to western imperialism. The discourse of coloniality, situated primarily in Latin America, has greatly enriched post-colonial studies through critical analyses of the productivity of western cultural imperialism and power. What I would like to do here is turn the lens away from specific instances of power and their accommodation or refusal and toward understanding processes of interpretation and the unstable, unpredictable, rapidly shifting nature of knowledge production in general and of the self in particular. I would like in this work to begin building an ethnographically grounded philosophy of interpretation that considers not only the previously explored functions of power but also the role of contingency, performativity, paradox, and contemporality in a post-colonial context. In other words, what are the lived experiences, receptions, and renderings of articulations of power in a post-colonial, pluralistic society? As I will argue in this chapter, communities are made up of individual actors continuously engaged in the process of operationalizing their subjectively rendered knowledge categories. As such, features such as paradox and contradiction operate seamlessly within the domain of a broader cultural logic and within the operative logic of individual members. My own work among Trinidadian Hindus has underscored for me the fact that paradox and contradiction are as much a part of knowledge categories, including ontological ones, as positive abstract forms.

In a three way dialogue Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Zizek agree that “‘identity’ is never fully constituted” and, further, that “identification is not reducible to identity” (2000: 1). In her first essay of the dialogue, Judith Butler continues building on her already well articulated thesis (2006; 2010) that subjective experience is not only incapable of being fully captured by discursive forms (interpellated, in Althusser’s usage) but that subjective experience also potentially destabilizes the very category that attempts to universalize subjectivity itself. Departing somewhat from her typically Foucauldian approach, Butler latches on to a dialectical Hegelian analysis to address the question of universality in an attempt to determine how we might understand processes of subject formation. Just as Hegel had posited that the subject is continually in a state of transformation due to a shifting relationship with the object, so Butler asserts that Hegel’s utility is precisely in his awareness that universal forms and norms of culture (to use Rabinow’s language) exist in a contingent relationship with the subject. What Butler I believe rightly proposes is that we understand universals as existing in such relationships with subjects of any kind of hegemonic order. That is, because the subject by necessity is continually in a state flux, so to is whatever universalizing, abstract form that would attempt to regulate that subject. Any signifier then that attempts to establish meaning lives a double life: one in the abstract form from which it emerges and one within the concrete experience of the subject whose relationship to that signifier, which is a metonym of the universal abstract, is unstable. The meaning behind any given signifier is therefore contingent on the individual concrete context in which it operates.

To state this in more ethnographically grounded terms, consider the apparently self-evident term ‘indenture’. The polyvalence of the word is most immediately evident

by the fact that it operates as a verb (to indenture or to be indentured), a noun (as in a laborer, an indenture, or a plantation worker), and an adjective (an indentured worker). But as with many signifiers pertaining to labor in the Caribbean, racial and class glosses, several of them pejorative, inhere to the term. The indenture program was a labor scheme engineered by the planter class designed to fill the dual need of bringing in more workers after Emancipation and to depress wages for the freed slaves. Its situation in such a complex social context made both the program and the term controversial. For the plantocracy, as the autocratic plantation economy has been labeled, the program was one of necessity if West Indian sugar production was to remain competitive³. The indentured laborers, in the eyes of the plantocracy, were a means to an end, and their exploitation was justified in as many creative ways as slavery was. For Afro-Trinidadians, the indenture program was an obvious ploy to depress wages in what was at the time one of the highest paid labor markets in the Caribbean by saturating the island with a surplus of desperate workers (Williams 1981: 99). The indentured, as far the freed slaves were concerned, were simply the latest cogs to grind the gears for a ruthless colonial machine, and their intrusion into the Trinidadian labor market foiled Afro-Trinidadian attempts at greater bargaining power and agency in a system that had long oppressed them. Thus, an indenture, in the eyes of the Afro-Trinidadian labor class, was an opportunistic scab whose immigration, most galling of all, had been procured at the expense of Trinidadian tax payers. For the descendants of indentures themselves, the term is laden with paradox.

³ Sugar prices fell dramatically in the mid- to late-19th century as import substitution industries emerged in Europe in the form of beet sugar production. Between the 1840s and the 1890s sugar prices plummeted as total global production increased 700 percent (Rogozinski 2000:187).

It is a signifier of exploitation and salvation, coercion and cooperation, resistance and accommodation.

I have briefly alluded to the context dependent interpretation of the term ‘indenture’ for many Indo-Trinidadians in the last chapter. The definition and interpretation of the term shift because the context is unstable and contingent on what facets of the seven-decade event the interpreter wishes to highlight. Equally as important, the racial and class position of the Indo-Trinidadian community, situated between Afro-Creole Trinidadians and white colonials, motivated a highly paradoxical view of Indo-Trinidadian participation in the indenture program. Indo-Trinidadian sentiment toward their Afro-Trinidadian counterparts has alternated throughout history between indifference, suspicion, animosity, solidarity, as well as numerous other nameless feelings, depending on the set of events unfolding in Trinidadian politics, labor, and economics. When emphasizing their resolve, ingenuity, and perseverance (think *Ramayana*), Indo-Trinidadians commonly interpret their history with indentured servitude as one of triumph against exploitation at the hands of seemingly more powerful forces (as Rama similarly accomplished against Rawana). In this narrative, the defining feature is fortitude as heritage of Hindu legacy. It is from this narrative strand that many observers see unabashed Hindu nationalism, ethnocentrism, and racial superiority. The subtext that is often rightly read into these narratives is one of Hindu resistance where their Afro-Trinidadian counterparts were simply exploited laborers who only acquired freedom after it was given⁴. The other side of this narrative is one of volition, partnership,

⁴ Naipaul suggests in his novel *The Suffrage of Elvira* that this could be fairly said of all Trinidadians. “Democracy had come to Elvira four years before, in 1946; but it had taken nearly everybody by surprise and it wasn’t until 1950, a few months before the second

and salvation. Indians participated in the indenture program willingly, it is often argued, in order both to strike out in new lands and to help England restore one of its beleaguered colonies. Trinidad was in a state of disarray before their arrival and needed the hard work and dedication of a new class of laborers to remedy it. Both narratives, as well as the myriad permutations of them, are, of course, apocryphal. As with nearly all apocryphal accounts, the interpretation of the events in question suit certain ideological ends. In the case of Hindu Indo-Trinidadians, the recasting of indentureship as a willfully engaged enterprise allows them to underscore their equality with empire. It is a means of understanding the self whose contingency rests on how the narrative of indenture is structured in specific social-political contexts. The utility of Butler's model is immediately evident here as it is clear that discursive and repressive forms of hegemony are negotiated by Trinidadian Hindus in highly varied, often paradoxical and contradictory ways.

Given the contingent nature of discourse and the way in which it is understood, reinvented, performed, and interpreted it needs to be accounted for in light of the context in which its technologies are deployed. The various interpretations of indenture in Trinidad should be understood not only as a refusal of western hegemony but also as a product and practice of a broader social-cultural ethos allowing for shifting valences and the destabilization of meaning. Aisha Khan's classic essay 'What is a Spanish'? accurately describes the contingency of the racial signifier 'Spanish' (1993). As Khan points out, the term's ambiguity rests in part on the fact that the term itself is not always

general election under universal adult franchise, that people began to see the possibilities" (1987: 13; see also Naipaul 1978: 78, where he uses virtually the same phrasing).

self-evident even to those who use it. It is a catch-all term that attempts to categorize those who do not fall obviously into the Indo-Afro phenotypic binary. The signifier is metonymical of social-cultural features that lend Trinidad its uniquely amorphous social structure that Naipaul disparagingly referred to as a ‘picaroon’ society. Using Naipaul’s critiques of Trinidad, I would like to outline some salient features of Trinidadian society based on textual, archival, and field research in order to establish the variability of discursive power and the problem of subject creation in colonial and contemporary times. I would like to use Naipaul as an entry into this discussion first to outline some of the broader features of Trinidadian social/cultural forms, and second to point out that it is within those behavioral points that Naipaul so disparagingly critiques that we can find the interstices of structural determination and subjective agency.

Naipaul’s Trinidad: Convergences and Contestations

A mantra I’ve grown accustomed to hearing from several of my closest friends, confidants, and informants in Trinidad is to “read your Naipaul”. As far as they are concerned no writer, Trinidadian or otherwise, captures the essence of Trinidad’s uniquely eccentric character as Naipaul does. Of course, I have read and do read Naipaul routinely, but this is not what they mean. There is an unmistakable subtext to their imperative reminding me that Naipaul is one of the sharpest exegetes of Trinidad whose characterization of it is the clearest distillation of their post-colonial society. When discussing my fieldwork and the people I’ve met and worked with, I am often asked if I’ve read a certain Naipaul novel, which invariably leads the group into a long reminiscence of Naipaul’s colorful eccentrics and acerbic descriptions of Trinidadian life.

Inevitably I ruin the fun of rehearsing classic lines and scenes by launching into a critique of Naipaul's narrow contextualization. Naipaul's work does succeed as a satiric, vaguely ethnographic brand of literature. And several of his stereotypic characters are hardly embellished; Trinidad supplies plenty of eccentrics, such as those of *Miguel Street* (1984), that need little literary flourishes⁵. Neither do I doubt that Naipaul's characterizations of several of the broader trends and features of Trinidadian society are largely accurate. There is an unmistakable kind of individualism there that is cynical, guileful, and self-serving. And such a form of individualism does lend Trinidad an air of social lawlessness that subverts normative forms as they emerge. Yet it is this quality that lends Trinidad its undeniably creole character, its sense of cultural form in constant movement, negotiation, and contestation . But Naipaul's characterizations emerge from a belief that the West Indies has never created anything, produces nothing but cheap facsimiles of western cultural forms, and strives in vain to mimic modernity without actually embracing the ideals and values that make modernity the success it has been in the West (see, for example, *The Mimic Men* 2001). "The history of the islands", he writes, "can never be satisfactorily told. Brutality is not the only difficulty. History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies" (1978: 29).

⁵ On one of the many memorable late night drives around the island, my friend Burton regaled me with tales of some of Trinidad's most iconic oddballs, several immortalized in calypsos. For example, there was Minuteman, a 'Chinee' (Chinese) peanut vender so called for his ability to materialize in any quarter of the three square mile Queen's Park Savannah in mere minutes. My favorite character though was the taxi driver who 'drove' all over Trinidad in his invisible car. He could be seen walking in various parts of Trinidad, steering his invisible car along the streets and sidewalks. A small time politician got the great idea to ask the taxi driver if he could post his handbills all over since he covered so much ground. The driver agreed. He accepted the large sheaf of handbills, threw them in the backseat, and continued driving.

In a piece that earned him equal measures of scorn and accolades, V.S. Naipaul lays bare in *The Middle Passage* his stinging assessment of Trinidadian society. He describes Trinidad as a cynical society whose primary motivation is self-gain at the expense of others. Trinidad, according to Naipaul, is lawless, naturally anarchistic, corrupt, and brazenly self-serving. “Trinidad”, he states, “has always admired the ‘sharp character’ who, like the sixteenth century picaroon of Spanish literature, survives and triumphs by his wits in a place where it is felt that all eminence is arrived at by crookedness” (Naipaul 1978: 78). A consequence of such a cynical society is tolerance, but “not the tolerance between castes and creeds and so on – which does not exist in Trinidad anyway – but something more profound: tolerance for every human activity and affection for every demonstration of wit and style” (1978: 82). Thus, the picaroon society is one with a “taste for corruption and violence and [a] lack of respect for the person” (1978: 80). Naipaul traces this taste for corruption, violence, and trickery back to the colonial society “where every man had to be for himself; every man had to grasp whatever dignity and power he was allowed; he owed no loyalty to the island and scarcely any to his group” (1978: 78). Individualism then in the post-colonial West Indian society is not an ideology or an ethos but rather a consequence of a labor regime where only the most clever and cunning thrived⁶.

The theme of the picaroon is revisited in nearly all of Naipaul’s Trinidadian novels. Given the choice between failure at the hands of the more cunning or success at one’s own, even well-meaning people fall victim to using guile and trickery to achieve their aims, as seen most vividly in Naipaul’s portrait of Ganesh Ramsumair, in *The*

⁶ Eric Williams also inveighed against this type of individualism he believed rife in Trinidad (see Munasinghe 2001: 234).

Mystic Masseur (2002). Ganesh's early adult life is a shiftless, desultory existence as he casts about for something to do and someone to be. He settles on becoming a writer, which inspires awe and deference among his peers. After five weeks of concentrated effort Ganesh published his first book, *101 Questions and Answers on the Hindu Religion*. "Though Ganesh's joy was great there was one disappointment he couldn't quite stifle. His book looked so small. It had no more than thirty pages; and it was so thin nothing could be printed on the spine" (2002: 86). The book did little to bring Ganesh the notoriety he felt he deserved, small as it was. Desperate to bring more money into the house, Ganesh falls into curing spiritual and psychological maladies through the use of Hindu terminology (to lend his practice spiritual legitimacy), and psychology. Ganesh's success as a mystical masseur and Hindu pundit turns him toward community activism and ultimately to politics where he "dropped Indology, religion and psychology and bought large books on political theory" (2002: 200). He also trades his turban and dhoti for suit and tie. Ganesh's early desire to help Trinidadians, first through mysticism and psychology and later through community organizing, are thwarted in the end by a longing for status, recognition, and the hallmarks of modernity.

Ganesh is the perfect exemplar of Naipaul's belief that Trinidadians' success is a result of the artful use of 'wit and style'. At the end of the novel, Ganesh callously forgets his village friends who supported him throughout his endeavors. Now in suit and tie and a Member of the Executive Council, Ganesh opts for a more modern and sophisticated name, coldly introducing himself to an old acquaintance who shouts his Hindu name in a London train station as 'G. Ramsay Muir' (2002: 208). The evolution of Ganesh Ramsumair from humble village mystic with largely pure intentions to G. Ramsay Muir,

a self-serving man of cold pretensions, illustrates what for Naipaul is the tendency of West Indians: loyalty to the self⁷. As in *The Middle Passage*, Naipaul points the finger of culpability at British social construction, though he seems ambivalent about doing so. Ganesh's political activism and firebrand social advocacy catch the attention of colonial officials who promptly promote him to the prestigious rank of MBE (Member of the British Empire) where his position is largely ceremonial and politically impotent. Though Naipaul recognizes the problematic nature of the colonial society, indicating both its inability to nurture loyalties beyond the self and its cynicism, as we see in the case of *The Mystic Masseur*, he is reticent to interrogate social norms and practices as legacies of corrupt regimes. The administrative move that muzzled Ganesh was certainly a cynical tactic, but Ganesh's blind ambition to achieve notoriety and become modern through the machinery of British politics is what ultimately undoes him. Just as Naipaul focuses his sights on individuals and the creative ways in which they negotiate structures of power, bureaucracies, education and the like, so too does my work seek to describe subjective experiences of knowledge and power. However, though I see some of the same patterns in operation as Naipaul, I would like to dispel the notion that practices of modernity in Trinidad are simply mimesis or a vain attempt among certain communities to prove themselves as cosmopolitan or sophisticated as the West. His belief that Trinidadians are mired in a competition to prove themselves modern, hence the reason they drink Nescafe rather than the quality coffee they produce in the mountain regions, is what lends

⁷ Gordon Lewis concurs, linking picaroon individualism to plantation capitalism by stating that it "is difficult, if not impossible, to have an acquisitive society based on the private profit motive without at the same time having its logical consequence, a pervasive social climate of predatory individualism; which then adds new fuel to the Trinidadian legacy of Byzantine hedonism" (1968: 225).

Naipaul's work an almost Kipling-esque quality. Like the endearingly naive but earnest East Indians of Kipling's novel *Kim* (1988), Naipaul's post-colonial subjects are forever one step behind their lords. For Naipaul, the social dominance of personal ambition over other potentially socially cohesive forces, such as nationalism, class solidarity, or a nationally operative ethos, is what allows him to claim that "there is no set way in Trinidad of doing anything...Ostracism is meaningless; the sanction of any clique can be ignored. It is in this way, and not in the way of the travel brochure, that the Trinidadian is a cosmopolitan" (1978: 82-3).

The claim that "there is no set way in Trinidad of doing anything" is both hyperbole and irony; hyperbole because the claim, while based in what appears obvious, is an overstatement, and irony because some things in Trinidad appear immutably fixed. Two major examples come to mind: food and music. The recipe for roti (curried stew wrapped in flat bread) is the same whether you're in St. James, Curepe, Chaguanas, or San Fernando. The same can be said for doubles (curried chana, or chick peas, wrapped taco-like in fried flat bread) or macaroni pie or any number of iconic Trinidadian dishes. Similarly, musical styles like Calypso and Soca have not demonstrated the kind of radical experimentation with rhythm and melody that other Caribbean musics, namely Reggae, have ⁸ (on Reggae innovations see Hebdige 1997; on Reggae's link to radical social change see Chevannes 1998: 14; Homiak 1998: 172-3). Unintuitively fluid, however, are approaches to identity categories engendered by a willingness to experiment with knowledge and truth claims that leads Naipaul to claim that set procedures do not exist in

⁸ The one exception might be Rapso, a genre that takes the bounciness of Soca, mixes it with light social commentary in a vaguely Calypsonian fashion, and adds the upbeat of Reggae. Even still, this style is a hybrid genre, not an emergence, strictly speaking, from any one of the forms from which it borrows.

Trinidad. Naipaul is right to locate Trinidadians' experimental approach to problem solving in an immigrant context. Unlike most of the rest of the Caribbean, Trinidad never developed the kind of robust and rigid plantation economy that fixed operational procedure and established immutable hierarchies of order. Competing imperial logics of Spanish, French, and British domination blended with the cultural logics and cosmologies of immigrants from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia from the late 18th century to the middle of the 20th century, creating a creolized logos.

Naipaul's accounts of Trinidadian life offer readers insights into post-colonial culture that verge on imperial apologetics. Much like travel writing, Naipaul is content to sketch salient trends, patterns, norms, behaviors, customs, with only cursory attempts at locating their origin. In the case of what he calls Trinidad's cynical tendencies, he offers only a perfunctory claim that its roots lie in plantation social engineering. Naipaul's view that anything goes in Trinidad is, on one level, difficult to quarrel with. A striking feature of Trinidadian social life is the malleability and constant creative negotiation of forms that many members of other societies try assiduously to fix. Aisha Khan's study of the ethnic category 'Spanish', which serves as a catch-all racial signifier for the phenotypically ambiguous (not the white of French-Creoles, nor the black of Afro-Trinidadians, nor the brown of Indo-Trinidadians) is one of the more obvious examples of Naipaul's point (1993). But it is this very quality of malleability, indeterminacy, and contingency evident in certain aspects of Trinidadian social life that make Trinidad such a complex and intriguing study in processes of subject creation. The larger discursive shifts that in Europe gave rise to subject determining knowledge categories are less evident in Trinidad precisely because those knowledge categories of the self have been

continually contested and refashioned in their creole context. It is because there could not be a coherent nationalist project in Trinidad that there also could not be an effective governmentality that regulated conduct as Foucault has illustrated happened in Europe and as other anthropologists have explored in Europe's former colonies. A creole society is not a requirement of contestation, refashioning, or interpretation, as Foucault has aptly shown in his meditations on the process and power of individual thought (Rabinow 2004). But I don't think it would be controversial to argue that the creole context of Trinidad, or any deeply syncretized society imbibing values and symbolic media from numerous semiotic systems, demonstrate a more radical degree of idiosyncratic interpretation of discourse. Where Naipaul simply sees comical mimesis of European modalities I see creative, often paradoxical, interpretation and negotiation of modernity.

Naipaul's accuracy and satire are undoubtedly what make him popular among the educated (middle) class of Trinidad⁹. But Naipaul's observations, in contrast to more sympathetic writers, paint a rather dim portrait of Trinidad. His articulation of mimesis and its awkward sophistication contrasts with the earnestness of Sam Selvon's characters (1995), or the frustrated and oppressed of Earl Lovelace's (1989; 1998), the abject and ruined people of Harold Sonny Ladoo's work (2003), and the innocent and naive that populate Mittelholzer's one Trinidadian novel (2010)¹⁰. Whereas for Naipaul Trinidadians are merely acting out fantasies of modernity without truly apprehending

⁹ I might also add, anecdotally, that Naipaul's Trinidadian readers are also largely Indo-Trinidadian. Though Naipaul's satire appears to skewer Trinidadians indiscriminately, Afro-Trinidadians have felt unfairly represented in his novels, and not without good reason. It was his treatment of Afro-Trinidadian culture in *The Middle Passage*, however, that earned him the unyielding contempt of many Afro-Trinidadians.

¹⁰ The possible exception here may be Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* (2001), which, to my mind, is his most sympathetic treatment of Trinidad.

what modernity really is, for these other writers there is a greater sense of the tragedy of colonialism and the abjection suffered from it in its aftermath¹¹. The tragedy of the post-colonial world for Naipaul is not its abjection by the West and its dual place in the western imaginary as dependent and as a developmental afterthought. Rather it is that the post-colonial world is destined to remain mimicking the innovations of the West.

Racial antagonism in Trinidad, as Naipaul understands it, is simply competition for who may assume the privileges previously monopolized by whites. His resource competition reductivism, which leads him to fret over the introduction of electronic media that will only exacerbate the individualistic and fragmentary nature of Trinidadian society (1978: 82)¹², obscures the imaginative cultural spaces of Trinidad that remain in constant motion. Trinidad's notoriously haphazard approach to nationalism is not only a symptom of the failure of colonialism to develop subject determining governmentalities. Rather, it is also a sign of the refusals, the intermittent accommodations, the elaborate refashioning, of a modernity that belonged to another context and another habitus. As I will demonstrate here, subject determination and the regulation of conduct are indeed influenced by global modernity, but they are articulated and practiced through a locally specific interpretation of that modernity. Put another way, on one hand the hegemony of western cultural imperialism is neither complete nor total, and neither the reign of British colonialism nor the contemporary reach of postmodern capitalism had or have total

¹¹ Here I am borrowing ideas first from David Scott (2005) and his meditation on tragedy in the work of C.L.R. James, and second on James Ferguson's study of abjection in post-colonial Zambia (2004).

¹² "With commercial radio and advertising agencies has also come all the apparatus of the modern society for joylessness, for the killing of the community spirit and the shutting up of people in their separate prisons of similar ambitions and tastes and selfishness: the class struggle, the political struggle, the race struggle."

discursive dominance. On the other hand, however, those forces do materialize in local communities who must contend with them in some fashion. The Hindu communities I worked with illustrate the imaginative, paradoxical ways in which modernity can be negotiated.

Discipline and Purchase: Gaining a Foothold in Modern Capitalism

The term ‘discipline’ is in constant circulation in Trinidad. It was a favorite signifier of Eric Williams who once declared that if Trinidadians, with their abundant natural resources, had the discipline of Cubans, the nation would be an indomitable force of global commerce (citation). Naipaul’s Victorian ‘ethnography’ of the island in *The Middle Passage* is a thinly veiled prescription for the discipline Trinidad needs to overcome its troubles. “[The picaroon] society,” he authoritatively says, “cannot immediately become responsible; but it can be re-educated only through responsibility” (1978: 80). The term also has great traction among Hindus. The economy of the term belies an anxiety about falling prey to the ‘culture of the constant carnival’. At mandirs, at Hindu schools, at Hindu youth groups, and in casual conversation I heard the word, with all its attendant ambitions and fears, uttered dozens of times a day. Activities, games, performances, drills, commands, and Hindi and Sanskrit words, have been devised and arranged to curb any inclinations toward the lawlessness Hindu community leaders see playing out everyday on the streets and in the ubiquitous rum shops of Trinidad. Some of these routines are dredged from centuries old practices, extending back to local customs and rituals from particular regions of India. Some of the routines derive from practices established by contemporary Hindu preservation societies of India such as

the RSS or the Chin Maya Mission with whom Trinidadians have studied. And some routines are created independently, responding to the particular, context dependent needs of Trinidad's Hindu community. I have understood these forms, routines, practices, and articulations, as apparatuses of subject creation. That is, they are indigenously forged tools used for fashioning or molding individuals into disciplined subjects with the character traits that will ideally lead them to success.

Of all the forms, routines, and practices that they do in a day at the Hindu Prachar Kendra (from here on simply 'the Kendra', Figure 4), and at the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS), the most important is unquestionably the line formations. The line formations may be viewed as an 'ideal type' of the broader Hindu community and their concerns about failure and their efforts to circumvent it. The formations are militaristic, with commands such as 'attention', 'stand', and 'at ease', firmly shouted in Hindi phrases and words. As a model of discipline there is no greater exemplar than the military, a connection not lost on the leaders who promote the disciplinary ideal of regimentation and group order. Kendra students are expected to have the Hindi commands and their specific actions memorized and performed to precision. Watching the children sitting on the mandir floor suddenly stand at attention after hearing the command "utishta!" several times a day everyday, I was reminded of J.L. Austin's insight that words not only convey meaning but actually 'do things' (1955). It is the intersection of what these words do and the meaning they carry for organizers and leaders of these programs, as well as for the parents who tacitly endorse these methods by sending their children to these schools, that I wish to analyze.



Figure 4. The Kendra

The day begins promptly at the Kendra at 9:00 AM with the ringing of a brass hand bell. Nearly fifty students between the ages of 5 and 17 form three straight lines facing the *devasthaan* (shrine area). A fourth line, intended to showcase the undisciplined, is added for latecomers. Commands shouted in Hindi direct their behavior. “Daksha!” The students stand at attention, arms pressed to their sides, backs erect, and heads forward. Instructors check the lines, making certain they are straight and that students are standing ‘correctly’. “Araam.” The students stand at ease – hands clasped behind their backs, legs shoulder width apart – waiting to be addressed by one of their instructors. After one of the instructors paces back and forth before them, chastising them for either excessive tardiness, slowness to form proper lines, slovenly attire, or all the above, they stand again in Daksha (at attention) to recite the *Prarthana*, a praise hymn to the deva/is (primarily Lord Rama) pieced together from parts of the *Ramacaratimanasa* and recited in chant form.

Equally important as the correct (respectful) posture during the Prarthana is the accurate recitation of it. The hymn is 38 lines long, composed of Awadhi (a language of Uttar Pradesh in which Baba Tulsidas composed his Ramayana), KaAshikaa (the language of poet Kabir Das, a contemporary of Tulsidas), and Sanskrit. Pronunciation of the many words of the Prarthana must meet Shrutiji's exacting standards. It is a common practice of hers to make the children correctly recite certain terms or phrases that she believes are being improperly pronounced. One particularly salient example is the repetition of the word *purush*, found in line 6 and meaning both 'husband' and 'swami'. Correct pronunciation of the word, according to Shrutiji, is 'puh-[r]əsh', not 'pooh-roosh', as she hears the students mispronounce it. I've heard her make the students repeat the proper pronunciation of *purush* a dozen times and on several occasions. Why she chooses to be so particular about this term and not others points up the central operative logic of the Kendra – no terms, formations, commands, lessons, no matter how insignificant they may seem, are arbitrary. Discipline requires attention to detail, which students cannot effectively learn if they are expected to be precise in some areas and allowed to slack in others. In a society perceived to promote mediocrity at best and reckless self-indulgence at worst, the only corrective is to hold exacting standards. It is this set of standards, and the moral discipline it instills, that inspires parents to send their children to the program. Parents uniformly agreed that the most important feature of Kendra pedagogy is the emphasis on discipline. In contrast to practices in the United States, parents may send their children to disciplinary programs because the children are, or perceived to be, unruly. This is rarely the case at the Kendra. Parents send their children to the program not to correct unruly children but to rectify an unruly society.

Raviji founded the Kendra and the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh in 1981 with the goal of building a program that would address the needs of Indo-Trinidadian children in a Hindu fashion. Upon returning to Trinidad after studying with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) for ten years in India, Raviji saw a need in the community for programs that addressed childhood development in a disciplined yet creative environment inspired by the methods of generations of *rishis*, or Hindu saints. Studying with the RSS provided Raviji with the inspiration to create similar programs in Trinidad. The line formation drills, the recitation of Ramayana scripture in Sanskrit and Awadhi, and the theatrical classes used in preparation for performance of the Ram Leela, are inspired by the success he witnessed in similar programs operated by the RSS. For Raviji, the success of a community, and of each individual member within it, rests on the proper training of the children. As he put it to me, “We need to reach the young children. Five to seven is an important age. They are the future of Trinidad. They need to learn to speak up and speak out.”

After the Prarthana the children are then asked to sit, cross-legged, backs straight, without slouching, talking, or fidgeting, as they are addressed by an instructor. The first day of class is always the hardest, head instructor Shrutiji tells me, because new students must be acculturated to an unfamiliar system of regimentation, control, and discipline that they do not experience at home or at school. And returning students, many of whom backslide throughout the rest of the year, must relearn the system and resist the temptation to misbehave. This is no small feat, Shrutiji marvels, given the self-centered, unruly, and morally undisciplined times we live in. Children are not accustomed to discipline, to appropriate behavior, to respectful comportment, she implies, because the

culture in which they mature does not expect them to. The Naipaulian view that anything goes has a parallel here. The instructors of several of the programs I worked with, as well as parents of children participating in them, see Trinidad as a society without structure where doing what one can to get by is acceptable. For them, the Trinidadian ethos, writ large, fails its members for its inability to nurture the moral and intellectual faculties that build healthy communities. Understood in this light, the emphasis on punctuality, order, deference, and precision are not simply means of inculcating Hindu specific values. Rather, they are exercised as a means of self and community empowerment and understood as media by which creativity, in conjunction with discipline, promotes professional success. As we will see in greater detail in the next chapter, there is a paradoxical tension between the dual emphasis on precision and creativity. To foreshadow that discussion, it is worth briefly mentioning that that tension is symptomatic of a larger paradox between Hindu preservationism and the agency to creatively interpret and reimagine texts and practices from the vast Hindu complex. That tension plays out in numerous ways in varying degrees of magnitude every day and points up the difficult position of Hindu religious leaders pulled between forces of tradition, agency, context, multiculturalism, modernity, and transnationalism.

The Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh

Line formations, simply called ‘formations’ by the students, are also a central feature of the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh’s (HSS) *shakha* meetings. Shakha meetings typically take place in the savannahs (open, grassy parks) in several areas throughout Trinidad and are something akin to what other religious communities would call a ‘youth group’.

However, as Krishnan, one of the leaders of the group in his mid-twenties, told me, people of any age are welcome to join, though I was the oldest by a wide margin. Most of the roughly 15 participants (the number varied evening to evening) were young teenagers, the youngest being 10 and the oldest 17. The evening begins with the formation drills, all conducted in Hindi with a smattering of Sanskrit. The line drills for shakha are considerably more complex than those for the Kendra, though both stem from the creative efforts of Raviji, who is also responsible for founding the HSS in Trinidad after his return from India where he worked for ten years with the RSS.

The formations begin in *svasthaan*, which is composed of two straight lines, one female, one male, facing a flag of the elephant headed god Ganesha, remover of obstacles. The person from the end of each line walks to the front to report *sankhya*, the count for the line. After a short prayer in Hindi to Ganesha, the two lines turn abruptly to the right, on the heel, at the command ‘dakshina vrita!’. The *gana* (group) then practices responding in precise unison to the many commands. ‘Ek pada pura sara’, shouts a designated leader in curt, militaristic style. Everyone takes one step forward. ‘Ek pad prati sara’. The *gana* takes one step back, returning to *svasthaan*, original position. Then we rehearsed the turns, where I struggled to keep the orderly symmetry of synchronized movement intact. As the leader belts out the commands the *gana* is permitted just enough time to complete the action before another is sounded. Maintaining the integrity of the *gana* is essential. ‘Dakshina vrita’, right quarter turn. ‘Vaam vrita’, left quarter turn (*svasthaan*). ‘Ardha vrita’, right about turn. ‘Ek pad dakshin sara’, one step to the right. ‘Ek pad vaama sara’, one step to the left (*svasthaan*). Each command follows on the heels of the last, pushing students to concentrate and move both correctly and efficiently.

Misapprehension of commands leads to missteps and noticeable breaks in formation, though nobody in my experience was ever reproached or ridiculed for mistakes, thankfully.

Though the commands are unquestionably formal, which, incidentally, the students take seriously even in the absence of authority figures, the air of shakha is casual. It feels like liming, but with a purpose. The feel becomes noticeably more casual when the formations end and the organized activities begin. All of the activities, which are mostly strategy games, require physical movement, some of them tremendous dexterity and concentration. Several of the games get so rowdy they separate the boys and girls, though some girls felt they could take anyone in the group, and rightly so. Like the formations, the games have a purpose beyond simple camaraderie and play. Each game is designed, Krishnan explained, to teach life lessons and promote goal achievement. I could sense this even while playing the games.

A game that stood out for its clear link to the HSS values and concerns was the break through game. In the break through game, two to three players are pitted against a wall of foes composed of the rest of the gana who attempt to prevent them from reaching their targeted goal. All players but two are lined up abreast facing their adversaries (typically the two most physical and agile players) who stand between them and the line they must reach on the other side. The goal is simple. Get past the two adversaries in the middle who will attempt to prevent you from reaching your goal by grabbing you and holding you in place. Once caught, the player then becomes part of the defensive wall, growing more intimidating by turns. The offensive players, their numbers shrinking as the wall grows and looms more menacingly, must try harder every turn. The offensive

players could work together, sending one player as a sacrificial decoy to free the others. Though such ideas are toyed with, the fun of the game lies in matching one's speed and agility against that of others. Neither did anybody ever employ trickery to get through. The strategy was uniform – run in a mad dash for the wall, make space with football (American) style stiff arms, and hope for the best. The purpose of the game, from an offensive point of view, is to employ every ounce of strength and determination to defeat those who will exert every effort to thwart your ambition. What makes the game rewarding as an offensive player is the success of reaching the other side after the spontaneous exercise of micro strategies demanded of the quickly changing obstacles. The game teaches players to draw on their creativity, strength, and perseverance to succeed and can be seen as a ritual of the Hindu-Trinidadian view that society, anthropomorphized in this view into an agent of resistance, will attempt to hold one back despite one's singular struggles. More broadly conceived, it is also a ritual of neo-liberalism. As with many of the others, the break through game ritually embodies the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh's unequivocal motto "We achieve by our own efforts".

While playing the break through game I was reminded of Althusser's notion of what we might shorthand as 'practical ideology'. As Althusser explains, the ideas that underwrite ideology eventually disappear and instead become the animating force of ritualized activities through material apparatuses. That is, the ideas promoted by, in Althusser's case the ruling class, no longer need specific articulation but rather are reproduced through ritual action that naturalize them. "Ideas have disappeared as such", he proposes, "(in so far as they are endowed with an ideal or spiritual existence), to the precise extent that it has emerged that their existence is inscribed in the actions of

practices governed by rituals defined in the last instance by an ideological apparatus” (1995: 128). Althusser shares terminology with Foucault, particularly in regards to the use of the notion of an apparatus as a means by which to shape subjectivity. Though Althusser’s structural Marxist system works out a little too neatly in my mind to mirror accurately subject/ideology relations, his insight, which would clearly have a measurable influence on Foucault’s work on discourse through problematization, assemblage, apparatus (see Rabinow 2005: 47-56; 76-77), into the way in which ideology is embodied through ritual is instructive and useful.

Another game, cryptically titled “Cubadee” (a name nobody could define for me, thought by most to be a nonsense word), played out in ritual form a paradox Hindu leaders wrestle with in numerous ways. Cubadee is a prime example of the contradictory binary between individual choice and community empowerment demonstrated through a rather aggressive game. Two teams line up facing each other with about twenty feet between them. A player from one team approaches the other repeating the word “cubadee” without breaking. While in the territory of the other the cubadee repeater must try to touch an opposing player and make it back to her or his own camp without being pulled into and held by the opposing team. If the cubadee player cannot break free she becomes part of the opposing camp. The continuous repetition of the word cubadee is an essential feature of the game. Players are not allowed to cease saying the word for any reason, including taking a breath. This is where the mental fortitude comes in. As the cubadee player ‘attacks’ the opposing team he will hear taunts and accusations from them. They will accuse the player of ‘breaking’, either hoping to convince him that he did break so he gives up, or, in my case, distract him so that he can be grabbed and brought

into the opposition. “He break! He break!” the players shout, causing confusion and attempting to distract the player from his goal. The cubadee player, I was told, must be quick, focused, and unperturbed by the pandemonium the opposition creates. I had the sense that the leaders designed this activity as a demonstration of ‘crab antics’, as Peter Wilson (1973) called it, in game form. As Wilson describes it:

Crab antics is behavior that resembles that of a number of crabs who, having been placed in a barrel, all try to climb out. But as one nears the top, the one below pulls him down in his effort to climb. Only a particularly strong crab ever climbs out – the rest, in the long run, remain in the same place. (1973: 58)

The fear of crab antics, and of remaining in the long run in the same place, is what animates the efforts of the HSS and prompts games such as cubadee. As an artifact of practical ideology cubadee is rich in metaphor and symbolism. The game is a ritual re-enactment of the chaos and confusion rife in Trinidadian society that will drag the weak back into the barrel if they are not vigilant. One parent told me that he tries to avoid ever having to take maxi-taxis (Toyota micro-buses that seat a maximum of 12 people, ideally), especially when shuttling his kids around, because the loud music (often soca, American hip hop, or reggae) “disturbs the mind”. It is his belief that such constant “noise”, as he called the music, prevents a calm, peaceful, and focused mind, thus resulting in personal failure and social chaos. Cubadee embodies that belief, demonstrating to students the reward of focus and discipline and the consequences of succumbing to chaos. The interpretive logic that underwrites the game is one that regards not only local ‘Trini’ culture as spiritually disruptive, but by extension globalized forms of popular culture as well. The bass heavy hip hop from the US that rattles the windows of the maxi-taxis (and the souls of some their passengers), is emblematic for many devout

Hindus of the moral misdirection of both Trinidadian and global popular culture¹³. In order then to prepare their children for success later in life, they must demonstrate to them in tangible and immediate ways the rewards they can expect from remaining, like Rama, steadfast, and the consequences they can expect from succumbing to carnival culture around them. Crab antics must be overcome by personal will and an effective exit strategy from those who will hold you back. Once out and successful the final piece is to “give back to your community”, as Raviji routinely implores the kids.

The importance of giving back was the subject of many of Raviji’s short lectures. On countless occasions I would hear him, or any of the other teachers, repeating the mantra ‘give back to your community’. One such lecture he called “The 4 Ps”. Speaking in his partially modified Indo-Trinidadian dialect, he asked the students if they knew the meaning of the word *aticari*. They shook their heads in unison. “It mean to do more.” He surveyed the room, pacing slowly in his dhoti, waiting for the meaning to sink in. Then he asked them rhetorically, “Who doin’ more? Who could do more?” Eager to please their guru, the little children enthusiastically raised their hands. Happy with the response, Raviji introduced the 4 Ps. “To do more you have to know what to do. So, the first P stand for Pick Up.” He looked at one of the small children, “You could pick yourself up? You could be a good Hindu? Pickin’ up mean you have to have the power to resist.” I believe he meant the power to resist the forces that would divert one from the dharmic, or correct path, but he never elaborated. “The second P is Pin Up. Takin’ responsibility. You

¹³ When I told a friend of mine about how my Hindu informants felt about maxi-taxi music he said they were not alone. Evidently passengers began bitterly complaining to the Ministry of Transportation about excessive noise levels in the vans. A law was passed in the late nineties prohibiting ear-splitting volumes. As with all things, ‘excessively loud’ is a relative term. By Trini standards the volume in maxis is now acceptable, though few Americans would tolerate such levels in public transportation in the States.

have to be responsible for your actions. But you have to help the little children too. That's why the third P is Pull Up. We all bringin' up the children." He made a strong gesture with his hands at this point, as if picking up a small child by his lapels. The children were transfixed. "The fourth P is Push Up. To do this you have to be ready to take charge. You have to be strong to push back. Who could do this? Who strong enough to do the 4 Ps?"

Spontaneous mini lectures such as the 4 Ps emerge continually and can be provoked by anything from misbehavior to plain inspiration. I figured that the 4 Ps would become a theme of some kind, perhaps worked into the theory lectures or skit sessions, but I never heard anything about it again. This was simply another way to articulate the importance of Kendra values like hard work, discipline, determination, and giving back. The mantra to give back to the community typically followed on the heels of a discussion about reaching one's goals and becoming successful. For the Kendra community then, success is achieved through the support and nurturing of individuals by a community of people who give back what they themselves received. The concept and injunction to give back to one's community expresses a deep desire for the community as a whole to prove its power and potential as well as expressing anxiety that the successful will simply leave and never return. Trinidad is not only an immigrant nation, it is also an emigrant nation, with a higher rate of emigration than birth and immigration rates combined¹⁴. The bright and ambitious, Trinidadians will say, leave the island to make their fortunes in the US, Canada, or the UK, the top three destinations of emigrants. A scene I witnessed play out among some friends of mine is a common one in Trinidad.

¹⁴ The CIA World Fact Book keeps the most updated data on these figures.

One night I stood in Woodford Square, the famous venue of Eric Williams' many open lectures to Trinidadians and thus renamed 'University of Woodford Square', waiting for then Prime Minister Patrick Manning to speak to a sparse and largely disinterested crowd. One of the guys I was liming with that evening had just returned from France where he was teaching English, and making good money doing so. His friend reproached him for his selfishness, telling him he needed to return and "give back to Trinidad." The English teacher's reply was unequivocal. 'No I don't.' "Trinidad gave you a free education. You owe your country", he pleaded. "No I don't."

And so it went. It is precisely this kind of callous disregard for abandoning Trinidad and the communities within it that Kendra and HSS leaders hope to avoid. The emphasis on being nurtured by and giving back to the community thus attempts to redress the problem of progress in the Hindu community and their perceived lack of it. Put in Naipaul's somber terms, if individuals pursue success entirely for their own pleasure, we do not have a community but rather a cynical collection of people sharing geography.

The emphasis on community stands in stark contrast to the HSS's motto 'We achieve by our own efforts.' Whether this motto was designed to counter the national motto 'Together we aspire, together we achieve', is difficult to say. However, what it does express is the widespread sentiment among members of these communities that prosperity and poverty are reflections of effort and discipline, in the case of the former, and laziness in the latter. Anand, a community member I spoke with at length on this issue, was insistent on this last point. My lay Marxist protests that class inequality is structurally perpetuated only reconfirmed for him his belief that one's lot in either

poverty or success is the result of individual choices. If parents would promote discipline in the home by making their children do sadhanas every day, as he does, the children will be successful. He pointed to his own kids as examples. Both are high academic achievers, one an archery champion in age brackets well above his own. He attributes these successes to the sadhanas and the discipline they promote and to the wise choices his children make, not to his middle class standing. Anand's worldview, straddling individuality and community support, is emblematic of the paradox embodied in rhetoric and ritual activity of both the Kendra and the HSS locally, and, more broadly, of the growing neo-liberal ethos of agency as choice.

Faced with elimination from one of the games, I stood on the sideline with Krishnan watching the others play. I asked him about the overall mission of Shakha and his vision for the future of the program. Presently, Shakha is small, run, as with nearly all Hindu youth programs in Trinidad, entirely by volunteers. Krishnan would like to keep the volunteer aspect intact, though the full time volunteers would be supported by the community. Ideally, one dedicated volunteer would travel around Trinidad establishing new Shakha ganas and administering the old ones. Supportive members of the community would feed and house the volunteer as she or he traveled the country looking after the ganas. The volunteer would be in essence a steward of the ganas and the methods by which they promote their programs, and more importantly, by extension, a steward of the ideals and values – discipline, effort, order – that permeate the community. Like Raviji, Krishnan believes that investment in the children is paramount, an absolutely necessary one if the children are to successfully negotiate the complex and distracting modern world. Krishnan stated these goals in the clearest terms of any other community

member. “ We want them to be successful in business,” he said, growing more animated as he talked. “We don’t want them to fail. We want them to go to college and be able to finish their work and do well.” Shanta, a vigorous and enthusiastic co-leader of Shakha, backed him up on this score. “The games teach them how to persevere, and that’s what we want them to do. We don’t want them to end up like so many other Trinis.” She didn’t specify what she meant by this last statement and I didn’t ask because I assumed what she had in mind. Though Trinidad is among the most productive economies in the Caribbean, it is still, as many Trinidadians like to say, ‘an island lifestyle’. By this they mean Trinidadians like to party, or ‘fête’, as the vestigial French term has it.

The Trinidadian love affair with *fête* (the term is both noun and verb) is legendary in the Caribbean, a fact many Trinidadians have shared with me on numerous occasions. “Fête after fête after fête!”, blares the radio, TV, and newspaper ads for the ubiquitous Soca parties around Trinidad. The *fêtes* typically feature a few popular Soca bands playing at maximum volume to a crowd of revelers *winin’* (grind dancing) at a fabricated venue and where rum and beer flow in torrents. In contrast to the many rum shops that densely dot the island, *fêtes* are designed for a more raucous, party-style atmosphere. It is unlikely that a Friday or Saturday night passes without some kind of hyped *fête* happening somewhere. I got the distinct impression at times that it is not necessarily the *fêtes* themselves that are worth talking about but that they happen with such frequency. In other words, it is the *idea* of the *fête*, and of Trinidad as the home of the perpetual *fête*, that is most central in the public imaginary. The *fête* in this sense operates as a trope of broader Afro-Creole derived Trinidadian values that embrace the country as a party island. Trinidad, in this view from the public imaginary, is

distinguished from other Caribbean islands by its willingness to let go, to celebrate, to enjoy life through song, dance, drink, and to live the culture of carnival¹⁵. This logos permeates much of Trinidadian popular culture, and not exclusively the Afro-Trinidadian imaginary. The State's role in patronizing Carnival masquerade groups, or *mas* camps (Scher 2004), is an implicit endorsement of including not only Carnival itself as a singular, copyrightable (Scher 2010: 160-179) event but the carnivalesque as a central node of a distinct nationalism. A major stumbling block to a cohesive and coherent nationalism is the widespread opposition to Carnival as a concrete yet emblematic event, and the carnivalesque as an abstract ethos played out in smaller venues from fêtes to rum shops to limin' on street corners.

We can now understand in more detail the publicly voiced protests of Hindu leaders such as Sat Maharaj of the Maha Sabha, as well as those of the program coordinators I worked with, who worry about their children attempting to self-actualize and compete in a globally competitive environment in a nation whose principle ethos is perpetual celebration. Munasinghe is right to suggest that Trinidad's struggles with a functional nationalist project are the result of problematic colonial discursive forms that generated racialized social strata while demanding a homogenized nationalism (2001: 34). However, the political struggle she outlines takes place within the terrain of what she identifies as ethnic identity politics. Shifting the lens from a focus on identity to a focus on transnationalized economic logics – competition, efficiency, agency – a different, yet equally salient, problem set emerges. In the communities I worked with I saw less

¹⁵ José Limón's engaging study of the celebration of carne, carnales, and the carnivalesque among Mexican immigrants in a Texas border town has a clear parallel here (1989: 471-486).

evidence of the essentialist racial discourse inherited in part from Western knowledge categories, and more evidence of anxiety over cultural constructs that appear to obstruct Trinidad's potential. The practices of preservationism and cultural reimagination of Hinduism I witnessed could be, and are, viewed as a form of ethnic nationalism. But to do so invokes its own kind of discursive hegemony that fixes the focus on colonially derived notions of ethnic superiority rather than the recent shifts in global logics that exert an identifiable and analyzable influence on communities eager to prove themselves capable of competing on these terms. To view cultural praxis in this way is neither to deny the existence of racism nor offer an apologia for colonialism. Far from it, the effort here is to tap into accelerating logical and ethical shifts taking place within local imaginative spaces influenced by and engaging in more expansive discursive fronts.

If the goal of an anthropology of the actual, or a "history of the present", as Rabinow has it, "is to identify apparatuses, to trace their genealogy, to show their emergence, and thereby make them available for thought and change" (2005: 55), we can trace Shakha to the central problematization of the colonality of neo-liberalism. The introduction of neo-liberalism in the developing world, and the Caribbean in particular, through policies of structural adjustment and increasing trade liberalization has been well documented (Mandle 1989; Black 2003; Dupuy 2005; McBain 2005; Grosfoguel 2008). Understood as an apparatus, or a "kind of formation" that coalesces as "a specific response to a historical problem" (Rabinow 2005: 54), neo-liberalism inaugurates novel governmentalities and revives certain old ones. In the case of the HSS and the Kendra, the local prominence of globalized neo-liberal ideologies of independence, discipline, and order, to name a few, blend with the refashioning of ancient texts and practices to form a

kind of radical pedagogy. The line formation drills, textual recitations in Sanskrit and Awadhi, and Shakha games (Figure 5) are both accommodations and recreations of a neo-liberal apparatus. As I will explore in the next chapter, the process of interpretation among members of the Hindu community is complicated by a dual position of resistance to the shifts in popular culture engendered by globalized formations of neo-liberalism, and as consumers of those forms partially liberated by the imaginative potential they carry.



Figure 5. HSS Shakha Gana

CHAPTER V

INTERPRETATION, KNOWLEDGE, PARADOX

It is not always the case that the dominant term as it is translated into the language (the idioms, the discursive and institutional norms) of a subordinated culture remains the same upon the occasion of translation.

~ Judith Butler, *Restaging the Universal*

...a language (langue) is still a system for possible statements, a finite body of rules that authorizes an infinite number of performances.

~ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*

You feel you know Ramayana, but that is not so. You cannot possibly know Ramayana.

~ Shrutiji, to her *Ramayana* theory class

In 1937 Trinidad erupted in a series of labor riots led by oil, cocoa and sugar cane workers frustrated by the exploitation as usual practices of the colonial regime. Stagnant wages in the oil, cocoa, and sugar industries, where profit margins continued to expand, as well as unacceptable working and living conditions prompted Afro- and Indo-Trinidadian laborers to stand in solidarity against retrograde imperialist policies (see Johnson 1987, for a discussion of imperial oil policy in Trinidad). Led by Afro-Trinidadian labor leader Tubal Uriah Butler and Indo-Trinidadian labor leader Adrian Cola Rienzi (formerly Krishna Deonarine), Afro- and Indo-Trinidadians staged Trinidad's most effective uprising against British imperial authority. As historians of the labor unrest and the events leading up to it have noted, the customary mutual suspicion that had long marked Indo-Afro relations were conspicuous for their absence throughout the uprising (Samaroo 1985: 77-92). Speaking on the indiscriminate exploitation of all of Trinidad's workers, businessman Timothy Roodal from the southern city of San Fernando noted in 1933 that,

The Empire today stands upon two colossal pillars – Africa upon the one side and India upon the other side, and believe me, sir, I have no hesitation in saying that there is a perfect system of exploiting the lifeblood out of these people, destroying two nations for the benefit and survival of another. (cited in Samaroo 1985: 85)

Roodal's racially inclusive condemnation of colonial oppression reflected the increasingly class-based protests gaining traction from the post-war 1920s to its apogee in 1937. As Craig-James (1987) and Johnson (1987) point out, the ruling class response was swift, entailing both physical repression and the redoubling of efforts to invigorate the divisive politics of ethnic identity and racial essentialism that had long kept Afro- and Indo-Trinidadian laborers at odds with each other (see also Samaroo 1985: 92).

By 1956, when Eric Williams' PNM party formed and later assumed control of the state apparatus at Independence in 1962, Indo-Afro relations had deteriorated to new lows, each accusing the other of playing politics with race (Premdas 1993). The rise of pan-African nationalist movements throughout the Americas in the 1960s and 70s, inspired by Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in the 1930s and 40s, the Black Power movement in Jamaica and the United States, and the literature of *Négritude* (Burton 1997; Anderson 1995), *Créolité* (Bernabé et al 1993) and *Antillanité* (Glissant 1997) in the French Caribbean that sought to affirm the creative agency of black French West Indians, prompted renewed suspicions between Afro- and Indo-Trinidadians in the latter half of the 20th century. Despite Prime Minister Eric Williams' occasional attempts at conciliation between his PNM party and the predominantly Indo-Trinidadian Democratic Labour Party (DLP), and thus between Afro- and Indo-Trinidadians (Oxaal 1968), tension remained high between the two

groups, especially during election cycles¹. Almost sixty years after the labor riots of 1937, Trinidad nearly erupted again into civil unrest after the election of its first Indo-Trinidadian prime minister in 1995. As I pointed out in Chapter II, Basdeo Panday's electoral victory invited widespread celebration among Indo-Trinidadians and stoked fears of retaliation for their years of political dominance among Afro-Trinidadians. Fearing ethnic favoritism, Afro-Trinidadians protested Panday's victory vociferously and often. As Raviji related to me, reporters from the BBC were on hand prepared for rioting and massive ethnic clashes. When one of the reporters asked Raviji if he expected violence he replied, "To all appearances it looks as if it will [be violent], but I don't think it will. Trinidadians go so far and stop just short of violence."

Raviji's prediction was, of course, accurate. No riots or large-scale acts of violence ever broke out over Panday's election. Though he was never embraced in a meaningful way by any but his own Indo-Trinidadian community, he managed to hold his position until he was removed from office on corruption charges in 2000. Again in 2010 Trinidad elected its second Indo-Trinidadian and first female prime minister in Kamla Persad-Bissessar of the United National Congress. Her election was remarkable for its lack of controversy, helped no doubt by the roughly equal proportion of Indo- to Afro-Trinidadians in her cabinet.

The history of Indo-Afro relations from the 1937 labor uprisings to universal adult suffrage in 1946 and the subsequent rise of the PNM in 1956, to the Black Power movement of the 1970s, to Panday's controversial election, and to recent electoral events

¹ Ask any Trinidadian about Indo-Afro ethnic relations and they will report with the nonchalance of someone reporting the daily phenomenon of sunrise that it ebbs and flows with political cycles. As one informant succinctly stated the problem of racial antagonism, "It's never good. But it's worse during elections."

surrounding the election of Kamla Persad-Bissessar illustrate the mobile nature of Trinidad's national imaginary. The distressing tenacity of colonial-era ethnic discursive categories remain a salient feature of public and political culture in Trinidad, but as the aforementioned events attest, in the public space of Trinidad's imaginary, that is, the shared space where what it means to be Trinidadian is conceived, articulated, performed, and contested, those discursive categories are subject to translation, which is always an act of interpretation. Following Appadurai (1996) and Rabinow et al (2008), I would like to explore the role of imagination in publically shared conceptual spaces and the ways in which these spaces are shaped, negotiated, contributed to and interpreted by Trinidad's Hindu community.

In his classic book *Modernity at Large* (1996) Arjun Appadurai expands Anderson's (1981) thesis that print capitalism contributed to the rise of secular nationalisms by exploring the ways in which the globalization of electronic media carry the potential to enrich imaginative spaces. Similar to certain cultural studies theorists such as Dick Hebdige (2007), Stuart Hall (2008), Paul Willis (1990) and anthropologists of globalization such as Michaels (2004) and Larkin (2004), Appadurai rejects conclusions from both the left and the right that situate consumers of globalized media as passive dupes of western cultural neo-imperialism. It is not that Appadurai's optimism has blinded him to the injustices and unequal power differentials between center and periphery. Rather, what he wants to explore is the "peculiar new force to the imagination in social life today. More persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before" (1996: 53). In similar fashion, Rabinow's insistence on an anthropology of the contemporary is a rather controversial attempt to

shift explorations of cultural norms and forms from those of historical determinism to those that can identify, document, and analyze new pressures influencing cultural spaces (2008). In a lively exchange George Marcus challenges Rabinow's insistence on an "untimely" approach to ethnography, asking how anyone can agree with being asked "to forget history" (2008: 56). Rabinow's response can be neatly summarized in his questioning of "whether historical conditions are everything. And I believe strongly that they are not. There is a great deal of contingency and under determination in most situations" (2008: 56).

Taken together, the work of Appadurai and Rabinow and Marcus open up the terrain of public imagination for investigation through a focus on "decomposing" the micro-practices of everyday life (Rabinow et al 2008: 95). The events surrounding Trinidad's recent national election capture the utility of a focus on the contemporary and on the role of globalized media in the shifting and shaping of public imaginaries.

Yes, We Can Rise: Campaigning Obama-style in Trinidad

When Barack Obama arrived in Trinidad in the spring of 2009 for a Summit of the Americas conference, the streets of Port of Spain, usually busy and bustling with traffic of all kinds, stood empty and silent. I happened to arrive in Trinidad just two weeks after Obama's visit and could still feel the reverberations his presence left in Trinidad's collective imaginary. Throughout Obama's visit Trinidadians were glued to their televisions, watching his every move and listening intently to his address. Talking with Trinidadians after his visit I didn't get the sense that it was the content necessarily of his speech that excited them so much as the potential he embodies being who he is in the

position he holds. Many Trinidadians said they sooner would have expected Americans to hire a woman for the job of president than a black man. The widespread public sentiment toward Obama in Trinidad echoes those of many other nations around the world. Though the American press and public seemed to recover quickly from the novelty of having just elected an African-American to the office of President, for many other nations, particularly those that suffered under the brutality of the slave trade and the centuries-long practice of slavery such as Africa and the Caribbean, that a black man has assumed the role of Commander in Chief of the most powerful nation on earth is nothing short of an improbable miracle. As a black leader of the free world Obama is a highly symbolic figure in Trinidad, representative of political potentialities, cultural changes, and individual possibilities. I was told by some locals that Kamla Persad-Bissessar and her team were impressed enough with Obama's silky smooth campaign that they hired one of his former campaign managers to run hers. A "bacchanal", that is, a controversy, had erupted over the issue because the PNM, I was told, attempted to block the campaign manager's entry into the country for fear that the UNC's campaign would be as successful as Obama's. Though I never found any evidence that would directly corroborate these claims, Kamla's campaign did bear an uncanny resemblance to Obama's. The terse yet emotive "We Will Rise" of the UNC, coupled with its impressionistic image of a rising sun, recalled Obama's "Yes, We Can" (Figure 6) with a backdrop of a rising sun over a prairie.

At the end of an uncommonly well-attended political rally for the UNC in Chaguanas I attended one evening, some pathos laden music began playing through the massive speakers framing the gold-draped stage. I recognized the band instantly as

Orange Sky, a local band that has managed to gain some international notoriety for playing a kind of reggae infused heavy metal. But I also recognized a feature of the song I couldn't put my finger on until I got home and watched Orange Sky's "We Will Rise" video. Both the song and video were dead ringers for American musician will.i.am's moving "Yes, We Can" song and video. "Yes, We Can" is shot in black and white, incorporating Obama's speeches into an acoustically driven song that features various musicians, celebrities, and lay folk declaring, "Yes, We Can". Orange Sky's "We Will Rise" uses the same format: acoustic guitar backgrounding Kamla's speeches as local people of note intermittently declare to the viewers that we will rise; all shot in black and white².

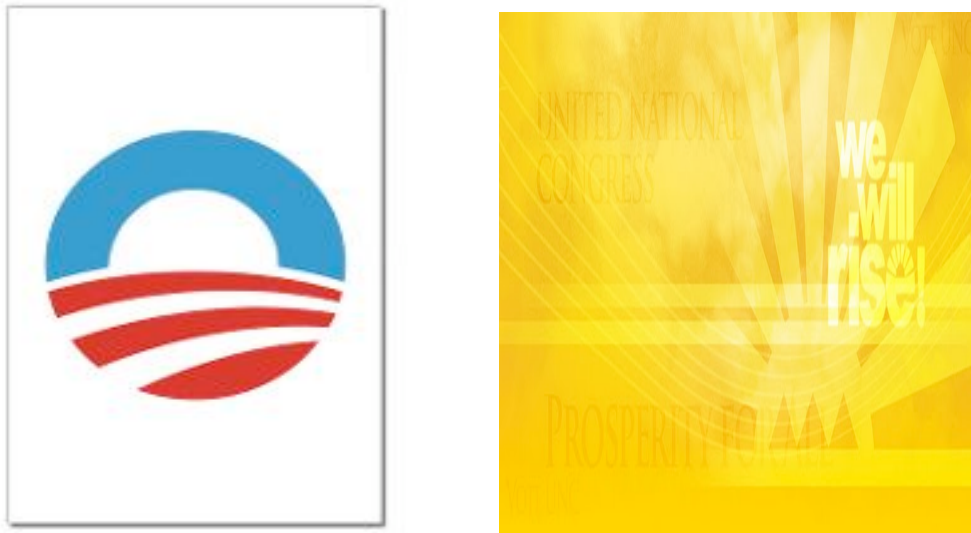


Figure 6. Yes, We Can/We Will Rise

² will.i.am's Obama video can be viewed on YouTube at "Yes We Can - Barack Obama Music Video" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjXyqcx-mYY>). Orange Sky's Kamla video can be viewed on YouTube at "We Will Rise – Victory" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQkWK7r6f9M>). A PNM supporter's disdain for Kamla's appropriation is evident in a "mash-up" combining the two videos, viewable on YouTube at "YES WE CAN' / 'WE WILL RISE" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X95u9fMh3Eo>).

The similarity of Kamla's campaign to Obama's in tone, style, and evocations, was striking. Though certain similarities bordered on what in other circles would have constituted blatant copyright infringement, the campaign played well to Trinidad's constituents. And for good reason. The campaign was remarkably well-run. The UNC used media such as music, video, and printed imagery effectively through evocative narratives and images. They tapped into simmering frustrations about a flagging economy, fears of corruption, and disturbingly high crime rates. And, perhaps most importantly, like Obama's campaign message, they sought to transcend the long and tiresome history of racial division by promoting a message of trust and togetherness. Just as Obama's Yes, We Can motto was intended as a positive message of hope that Americans may come together to solve their problems, so did Kamla's We Will Rise attempt to reframe nationalist discourse into a message of renewed hope about the potentials for an ethnically united nation.

The upcoming local elections taking place just after the national elections built on the momentum of Kamla's and the UNC's successful run at government, continuing with the same imagery and message. Although Kamla's campaign borrowed heavily from Obama's in nearly every way, it never felt like a tawdry rip off. The theme of change, central to Obama's message, was also the dominant theme of the UNC after ten years of PNM rule under the leadership of an increasingly hysterical Patrick Manning. Trinidad's floundering economy, spiraling crime rate, and fears of corruption and complacency in government lent the message of change a genuine tone. Looking at the litany of troubles besetting Trinidad I couldn't doubt the sincerity of UNC's members and supporters as they called for widespread change in Trinidadian politics. Put another way, Obama's

campaign did not simply inspire mimicry by the UNC. Rather, to phrase it in Appadurai's terms, Obama's successful campaign lent new imaginative possibilities to aspiring agents of change in Trinidadian politics. Orange Sky's near carbon copy of will.i.am's work is no less sincere, no less meaningful or relevant, for its direct influence. Kamla's transcendent message intended to inspire hope and change, much like Obama's, was a signal of an effort to shift the ideological direction of the nation toward an ethics of inclusion and united participation in improving Trinidad. Following Appadurai, if we are to understand Obama's campaign, with its somewhat revolutionary methods, as a global flow, what happened in Trinidad throughout the UNC's rise to power was the appropriation and re-imagination of a new way of interpreting, translating, and articulating real social problems and as they circulate in the public imaginary³. Obama's message and representation of a problem given form in public culture and circulating as a fragment of the "global cultural economy" (Appadurai 1996: 32), played so well to audiences in Trinidad not because it was American and therefore modern, as Naipaul might suggest, but because Trinidad is inextricably linked to global public culture,

³ To clarify the distinction made here between real and imaginary problems, all I mean to say is that real problems exist as both observable, measurable phenomena and as subjectively interpreted events. For example, crime is a very real problem for nearly every Trinidadian I've ever spoken to. The murder rate in Trinidad has climbed from less than one hundred in 2000 to over six hundred in 2010. Understandably, Trinidadians are alarmed by this very real problem. Depending upon where one stands ideologically, politically, ethnically, and class-wise, the source of the problem shifts. For instance, a UNC aligned Indo-Trinidadian might point blame at an ineffectual PNM government, another might point to what they see as Afro-Trinidadians' eagerness to join drug gangs in order to avoid hard work. Alternately, an Afro-Trinidadian might accuse the UNC and obstinate Indo-Trinidadians of obstructing PNM policies that would remedy the problem, and so on. All of these explanations for crime are ones I've heard first hand or read in editorials in the dailies. Hence the distinction between "real" social problems and those that exist in the public imaginary.

disjointed, contradictory, and irrational as it is, and shares the ethos of multiculturalism in an ethnically plural, late-capitalist context.

The West Indies, as Paul Gilroy (1993) has pointed out, has always had an ambivalent relationship with modernity. The effort to reconcile indigenous logics and aspirations with the yearning for modernity creates a double bind, what Gilroy has termed “double consciousness”. Gilroy’s articulation of double consciousness, vividly described by his metaphor of facing two directions at once, neatly captures the bind of Trinidad’s Hindu community, which has attempted to chart its own course through the rocky terrain of modernity and global cultural flows. If Trinidad can be said to wholly embrace transnational flows of popular culture, that would only be true in a limited and highly qualified way. Trinidad’s vibrant Hindu community does consume and even contribute to local and global popular culture/s, but it does so in calculated, uneven, and paradoxical ways.

Symbolic Creativity in Hindu Modernity

Sitting on the floor of the Kendra after the Prarthana one morning, Shrutiji announced that she had something very important to discuss with us. Always a no-nonsense woman who maintains a rather stern countenance, Shrutiji held the children in rapt attention as they awaited her report. Though Shrutiji suffers little nonsense, she is not an easily perturbed woman. This morning, however, she was clearly addled. “I want to talk to you today about an advertisement for Wendy’s I read about yesterday.” The kids looked a little confused, probably trying to figure out what Wendy’s was as there are no Wendy’s chains in Trinidad. Indeed, foreign owned fast food chains are completely monopolized

by KFC and a few Church's Fried Chicken and Popeye's Fried Chicken. There was a McDonald's years ago in St. James, a working class suburb of Port of Spain, but it closed, and there has not been a fast food burger establishment in Trinidad since. Shrutiji described the ad for us. "The advertisement has a big picture of Devi Lakshmi – everybody knows who Lakshmi is?" Several children eagerly raised their hands. "She the wife of Vishnu," a boy from the 5-7 year old class reported. "Very good. She *is* the wife of Vishnu," Shrutiji said, correcting his dialect. "In this advertisement Lakshmi is sitting in front of a giant hamburger. The caption says, 'The Sandwich is Sacred.' I will ask you, What does a Hindu deity have to do with hamburgers? Why did they use Mataji Lakshmi for their hamburger? Why are people always using Hindu deities for their advertisements? Do you think this is acceptable?" A girl from the high school group raised her hand. "They wouldn't ever use Jesus in their advertisements." I was astounded at the immediacy and clarity of her statement. Shrutiji quickly concurred.

Following on the girl's insight, Shrutiji asked, "Why don't they use Jesus instead of Lakshmi?" Before giving any of the students a chance to answer, she went on to explain the myriad ways in which Hinduism is disrespected in much of popular media around the world, making at times what appeared to me as oblique references to a long history of cultural imperialism and arrogance. This is a theme she would repeat for the students many times. After the release of the global blockbuster film *Avatar*, Shrutiji lamented the intellectual infringement by Hollywood of ancient Hindu concepts. She informed her class that Hollywood film makers are continually raiding Hindu iconography and lore for ideas that the Hindus will never get credit for.

Shrutiji's exasperation with the Wendy's ad and the film *Avatar* was not simply over the use, or misuse, of Hindu iconography by mass media. Rather, in a critique of popular culture that bears a striking resemblance to Fredric Jameson's (1999) critique of postmodernity, Shrutiji sees the "random cannibalization", as Jameson has it, of Hindu mythology as metonymical of a larger problem involving the dissolution of respect for tradition, the sacred, and ultimately, discipline. If Shrutiji were simply concerned with the misrepresentation of Hinduism she would have left off with the statement that the tradition is forever being cannibalized and that as Hindus we must be vigilant about protesting such abuses. But woven into her narrative was a critique of a permissive modern global culture that disregards sacred traditions and allows for the random appropriation of anybody's iconography. Her lecture was not simply then a call to arms against those that would debase Hinduism, but more importantly it was a lesson on the moral dangers of an increasingly chaotic, careless world. The Wendy's ad was merely a symptom of a global pathology that promotes an anything goes mentality. The ironic and offensive use of Lakshmi to sell a hamburger is a clear indication for Shrutiji that the boundaries between the sacred and the profane have been eroded by a global ethos of carelessness and self-indulgence. As with many of her other lectures, this one built on the theme of chaos abounding in the world, evidenced through the calloused disregard for traditions that strive to promote discipline. The *adharmic* tendencies of the modern world, that is, those that are non-dharmic, orient people's focus toward decadence, self-indulgence, laziness. This interpretation of modernity follows from a rather widespread Hindu belief that we are living in the historical epoch of Kaliyuga, the last of times

before the earth is destroyed and remade. But it is complicated by a participation in and consumption of many of the forms, ideologies, and products of global popular culture.

I found it telling in this last regard that Shrutiji's diatribes never suggested that Hollywood stop appropriating Hindu cosmological concepts and iconography but rather that Hindus should get *credit* as the originators of the ideas. For the film *Avatar* Shrutiji seemed less irritated with the bizarre interpretation of avatars and more annoyed with the fact that no mention was made of Hindus as originators of the idea. I got the distinct sense that had credit been duly given to Hindus as creators of the concept of avatars the discussion would have taken on a much different tone. "Hindus must be on their feet", she implored her audience, "because people are always taking things from Hinduism and twisting them around." Following on that theme, she also wondered why Greek mythology was so radically "changed up" in the film *Clash of the Titans*. What she appeared to be advocating for was narrative accuracy and credit for origination, rather than a moratorium on the use of another culture's ideas. I spent hours puzzling over this position without ever finding the right question to resolve it tactfully. Her position was puzzling on two levels. First, she seemed to be tacitly admitting that she viewed Hindu cosmology as a social construct. Based on some of her previous statements, in specific the one asserting that the Orisha and Hindu traditions worship the same things, this isn't all that startling. But in light of what looks like a fundamentalist approach to *Ramayana* study in her theory course, her campaign for intellectual credit stands at odds with that worldview. Shrutiji is not one to use words carelessly, so that she would discuss Hindu cosmology as just one set of ideas among the many circulating in popular culture is surprising. Second, though the tone of her discussion was stern, the content revealed an

undercurrent of flattery. It was as if she was saying that to borrow concepts from the deep well of Hindu lore is understandable, but the source should be cited appropriately.

Though the paradox in Shrutiji's position is not easy to resolve (indeed, doing so would be presumptuous), it does, I believe, reveal the kinds of subjective negotiations of popular media that involve accommodation, resistance, and interpretation that Stuart Hall articulates so clearly in his work⁴ (2007).

Taken together, the trenchant criticisms of the Wendy's ad and the film *Avatar* can be seen as one way in which the lawlessness of popular culture is resisted by a socially conservative community. Like Partap's belief that the music played in maxi-taxis "disturbs the mind", or the view from HSS leaders that situates popular culture, both local and global, as a force of personal destruction, Shrutiji's readings of the many texts of popular culture resemble the concerns of early theorists of mass culture. Q.D. and F.R. Leavis (2008), for example, wrote voluminously in the 1930s-50s on the moral and intellectual dangers of mass culture on young generations. In their view, popular culture texts pandered to humans' base instincts, bringing out their most savage and childish

⁴ During a lull in the theory lecture, I attempted to make sense of the paradox in this way: "It seems that the Indian longing for total recognition [I appropriate this phrasing from Scott 2005 in his treatment of Bernard Yack 1992] cannot be satisfied. Buried in that longing is an ideological conservatism that seeks to fix tradition and practice in such a way that derivations are deemed inauthentic. It also longs to lay claim to ideas and innovations as if there has not been a longstanding global tradition of culture exchange – or as if ideas could not independently co-arise. Jung's work on archetypes, however misguided by universalist implications, at least demonstrated that many similar concepts arose in various groups. This Hindu diffusionism rehearses the same absurdities the heliocentric anthropologists developed in the 19th century arguing that Egypt was the mother of all cultures – the *Um al Cultur*. Boas's historical particularism went a long way a long time ago to demonstrate the independent creativity and ingenuity of all culture groups. But we might also see in this brand of discourse an anti-orientalist narrative. It is an indirect way of stating how the West plundered and exploited the East. Seen in this light, narratives of intellectual property theft are ones that seek recognition for their contribution to western culture and imperial dominance."

qualities. For them, the corrective to the deleterious effects of mass culture was so-called high culture – classics of literature, art, and music. As the Leavises saw things, it was the duty of the upper classes, those who maintained knowledge and love of the classics, to promote civilization among the masses.

Upon this minority depends our power of profiting by the finest human experience of the past; they keep alive the subtlest and most perishable parts of tradition. Upon them depend the implicit standards that order the finer living of an age, the sense that this is worth more than that, this rather than that is the direction in which to go, that the centre is here rather than there. (Leavis 2008 [1933]: 13)

Here, the Leavises take their cue from the 19th century social critic Mathew Arnold, whose 1869 classic *Culture and Anarchy* outlined the ways in which working class culture in England was undermining classical culture and thus promoting social anarchy. Much like Hindu elders today in Trinidad, Arnold worried that losing sight of culture, which he defines as “the best that has been thought and said in the world” and which makes people “sensible to beauty, intelligent and alive”, would result in a lack of deference among the working classes for their superiors (2010: 6-7). For Hindu community organizers in Trinidad, culture carries a much more modern gloss and is often imbricated with ethnicity. Even so, its function as a civilizing force of discipline that attunes people, in this case youth, to what is right and good remains almost the same. For Trinidadian Hindus the concern is that the allure of mass culture, which, as we have seen, is an anarchic space where respect and deference are in short supply, will attune their children to selfishness and narcissism. A shared imaginary space that allows for the cannibalization of Hindu iconography to sell hamburgers, or carelessly appropriates important features of Hindu cosmology, or composes Calypsos making wanton and lewd references to Indian women, is a space that must be countered by the inherently rectifying

principles of key Hindu practices. The purpose behind exact recitations of Sanskrit and Awadhi scripture, yoga postures in the morning, raga (devotional music) lessons in the afternoon, and the acting of *Ramayana* is to cultivate a healthy mind that is focused, disciplined, and inclined toward moral duty, or dharma.

In similar fashion, Trinidad's Hindu community leaders regard their mission not so much as one of preservationism, but rather one of promoting ideal characteristics in the youth that act as ballast to the moral entropy of mass culture. That many leaders of the myriad Hindu communities in Trinidad view themselves as carrying this moral responsibility is, in my estimation, beyond question. Indeed, most parents who enroll their children in Hindu programs such as the Bal Ramdilla Vacation course, the HSS, Shakha, the Hindu Maha Sabha, the Chin Maya Mission, and many others, do so not only to cultivate and protect a distinct ethnic/religious identity but to expose their children to the ancient wisdom of the Vedas and its morally strengthening potential.

The rigid structure of the morning routines and classes at the Kendra give way to more free-flowing theatrical exercises in the afternoon. Often under the guidance of Raviji, whose own natural theatricality and wit inspires many of the children to strive to impress him, students will practice stage techniques by performing short skits for each other. Curious about the program, some parents show up well before the 5:00 pm pick up time to see what their kids are doing in the program. I take this opportunity to chat with parents, gently interrogating them about their motivations for enrolling their children in the program, what they think of the Kendra's methods, whether they see a difference in their child's or children's behavior, and so on. I looked forward to seeing some parents, cherishing their sophisticated understanding of pedagogy and child development. One

such parent was Brinsley, a father of a boy in Meenaji's 7-9 year old class. Soft-spoken and articulate, his thoughtful gaze trained on the roomful of students as they performed their skits, Brinsley explained that he wanted his son to learn strong social skills. Brinsley regretted having lost a connection with his Hindu past, admitting with mild shame that he really didn't know much about it. After speaking with him several times I thought he was being modest, but if he compared himself to other parents like, say, Partap, his knowledge of Hinduism was relatively thin. Though he wanted his son to learn more about Hinduism and Indian history in Trinidad, he expressed more enthusiasm about his son learning greater self-confidence through the Kendra's performance program. Brinsley was concerned that his son, a well-liked but rather shy boy, would have a difficult time later in life if he didn't learn to assert himself and speak out. As I will discuss in greater detail in the next chapter, Raviji routinely pointed out to the students, to me, and likely to parents, that Indo-Trinidadians are too passive and thus too afraid to speak out against injustice and to speak up for themselves. Though he didn't reference it specifically, Raviji's 4Ps program of self-empowerment was the kind training Brinsley sought for his quiet son. Like many of the parents I talked to, Brinsley said nothing of a Hindu renaissance. Indeed, of the roughly two dozen parents I spoke with on a regular basis, only two expressed excitement about a Hindu revival in Trinidad – one was Partap and the other Bharati, an energetic and outspoken woman bearing a large, full-color tattoo of Shiva, god creation and destruction, on her upper right arm.

If any of the other parents I spoke with shared Partap's and Bharati's enthusiasm for a renewed assertion of Hinduness in Trinidadian public life, they didn't say so. I suspect several of them, like Brinsley, would have been embarrassed to say so even they

were excited by the prospect of a Hindu rashtra (nation) in Trinidad⁵. But I never got the sense that Brinsley, or any of the other parents who shared their concerns about their children's future with me for that matter, was dissimulating. Even when talking about the recovery of Hinduism in Trinidadian, Brinsley was exceedingly careful not to disparage other traditions and pedagogies.

My parent's generation, and mine too, have lost a lot of the knowledge of the older people. I don't know much about Hinduism – a little bit – but not much. I think it's good people want to keep it strong. Raviji is a clever man and he knows a lot. I think my son can learn a lot here. What they teach here you don't get in the public schools. Learning to respect elders, being punctual, discipline – they [the children] don't learn in that in the public schools.

Brinsley's circumspect treatment of Hindu pedagogy is fairly representative of most parent's motivations for sending their kids to discipline oriented programs. Like the teachers of the Kendra, the HSS, and the Chin Maya Mission I worked and spoke with, foremost in their mission statements to me, and even to the children and their parents, is an effort to build confident, disciplined children. It is for this reason that several of the children attending these programs lack any sense of self-control when signing up.

About a week into the summer vacation course Ellen enrolled her five year old daughter in the Kendra. Aware that her daughter "is a handful", she agreed to stay at the Kendra throughout the day as a volunteer. Her daughter, Kharabi, participated in the activities she wanted to and ignored the others if they failed to meet her standards of

⁵ Driving back to Port of Spain from the Kendra one evening, my friend related to me that there was a group of radically minded Hindu intellectuals who harbored longings for a Hindu rashtra in Trinidad. The group, probably no more than about dozen people, hashed out plans to establish a rashtra in parts of Central and South that would eventually agitate for independence. The plan gained little traction and never enjoyed the backing of any of Trinidad's prominent Hindus. Following the well-worn path of nearly all utopias, the plan crumbled under the weight of reality and, to my knowledge, has not re-emerged since.

interest. At rest time after lunch, she would routinely refuse to lie down, making a fuss over whether her resting mat was properly arranged or positioned beside the classmate of her liking. She followed rules only when they suited her, and feared the rebuke of none. Her cavalier disregard for the Kendra's firmly established order rattled Shrutiji in ways I have not seen before or since. When one of the older kids had the audacity to steup (suck one's teeth in a display of indifference) Shrutiji she was irritated, but only expressed it to a small group of us later. Kharabi, by contrast, required herculean efforts of patience by the instructors. Steuping a teacher was one thing, but disregarding Raviji was something not even the greenest neophytes could imagine. Kharabi did. She made her own rules and feared no one. I had never seen a child vex Raviji. Indeed, I didn't think anyone ever could. The deference shown to Raviji by children and adults of all ages, classes, and stations is like none I have ever seen in such a context. It seemed impossible that anyone would try to vex Raviji. But Kharabi made a good run of it. During circle time after their short rest Raviji leads the children in performance practice. He has a firm yet entirely unthreatening way of including even the most bashful child in large group activities. Kharabi would have none of it. She never threw a tantrum about it, she just refused to bend to his will, which was all the more galling.

At the end of the long days the teachers and interns often hold informal conferences in the early evenings after the children and parents had all gone to lime and blow off a little steam, as all teachers need to do on occasion. These relaxed yet often intense conversations were some of my favorite times. The teachers' feelings and anxieties were aired, the talk was casual and open, and we would all share insights about best practices as a community of teachers. The group was agreed that Kharabi would

acculturate once she picked up the program's routine and became a part of the community. The other kids would help her along and the pressure to conform in the face of her peer group would weed out her solipsistic tendencies. I worried aloud that she may not assimilate seeing how little she cared for the approval of others. There were nods of agreement and we decided on a wait and see approach, which was all we could really do.

Ellen fretted over her daughter's recalcitrance, but as far as Shrutiji was concerned, not enough. Shrutiji feared that the child was spoiled almost beyond repair and was in dire need of serious and consistent disciplinary measures if she was to be straightened out. Ellen too had a difficult time controlling her willful daughter and thought a program such as the Kendra would help remedy her lawlessness. Ellen is a bright, well-educated and extremely cosmopolitan woman. Having lived in India, the United States, Canada, and most recently Trinidad, Ellen has a worldliness about her that stands in contrast to other parents of the Kendra, most of whom are small town Trinidadians. Her husband a successful businessman, Ellen can afford the finer things of life that her peers clearly cannot. She wears saris of the finest fabrics, which she pairs artfully with modest amounts of high- end jewelry. Ellen's upper-class habitus affords her social capital few enjoy in Trinidad's rural communities. Despite her station, however, she is a genuine and generous woman whose expectations of and commitment to the Kendra came in equal measures. I had ample opportunity to talk with Ellen and found her company easy and her insight keen. Like Brinsley, Ellen enrolled her child in the Kendra because of Raviji's sterling reputation and her hopes that he, and the Kendra, could help instill a strong work ethic and love of knowledge in Kharabi. Unlike much of America's upper classes, Ellen did not feel entitled to her wealth and recognized what a

tenuous thing prosperity can be. She worried what would become of her daughter as she ages and must begin competing against others on difficult exams for entry into elite universities. Like many Kendra parents, Ellen views the modern world as a competitive place that is best negotiated with a focused and disciplined attitude.

Kharabi is a smart girl. She has a lot of talents. But she has her own mind. I want her to get along with the other children. And I want her to be successful. But she needs to know how to work. She must learn to work with others. I think she is too independent. Some [independence] is good, but not too much.

Despite my subtle coercions, Ellen either overlooked or dismissed any critique of an overly individualistic, competitive global order, just as Shrutiji had done before her. Having lived in India, and later in Houston, Texas, and now Trinidad, it is likely Ellen has seen a good deal of class division and her fair share of extreme poverty. How deeply she has internalized and reflected on the issue was difficult to discern, but it was clear that she recognized her privileged status and the work it took to get there. As a family, they had to make sacrifices to enjoy their relative wealth, the largest being her husband's long absences from the home. But cashing in time for prosperity is a price they are clearly willing to pay. Her daughter too would have to make sacrifices in order to be successful, a lesson she wanted her to learn sooner rather than later. Ellen's narratives about her daughter's future, like the narratives of so many other parents, contained clashing strands of anxiety borne of uncertainty and an eager willingness to ensure Kharabi's success. For Ellen, the task at hand is to minimize the distracting forces of popular culture that will likely feed Kharabi's solipsism by introducing her to Hinduism's timeless values and empowering practices.

I try not to let her watch too much TV. I want her to be here learning with the other children. I heard great things about Raviji. I like the way he teaches the

children. He's creative, yet very strict. I think my daughter needs that. Learning *Ramayana* will help her.

The space of global and local popular culture is one whose values, logics, and aesthetics are often viewed by Hindus, both in Trinidad and beyond, as ones clashing with the timeless attributes of discipline, ambition, and duty promoted through Hindu texts, practices, and beliefs. Popular culture's prominent place in the discourse of Kendra and HSS leaders is one clear indication of their effort to counteract the powerful influence of mass media on their community. Another indication, as I will explore in the next chapter, is their willingness to participate in and contribute to Trinidad's popular culture in the form of musics such as pichakaree and chutney soca that reflect their concerns and make their voices heard amid the chorus of other voices.

Though Trinidad's Hindu teachers and community leaders work to counteract popular culture's adharmic (non- or even anti-dharmic) pull, they stop short of the kinds of critiques that hail it as universally destructive, irreparably wrong, or purely ideological, as articulated by the Frankfurt School and later Marxists. For scholars like Adorno and Horkheimer (1998 [1944]), whose work can be situated to some degree along the lines of Arnold and the Leavises, popular culture represented a form of capitalist ideology whose primary function is to dull the masses. Far from promoting individuality, the culture industry's main motivation is to appear to promote individuality while actually generating a homogenized mass of mindless consumers. "In the culture industry," they write, "the individual is an illusion not merely because of the standardization of the means of production. He is tolerated only so long as his complete identification with the generality is unquestioned" (1998: 154). For Adorno and Horkheimer, and even contemporary Marxists like Jameson, the fear is that popular

culture, in all its vapid, shallow, and meaningless images and references, will circumvent the possibility of true self-actualization, class consciousness, and a revolution of social equality. Trinidadian Hindus do not see the texts of popular culture as capitalist ideology or, as Barthes has it, mythology (1972). Indeed, if they did somehow begin to regard popular culture as an ideological formation of capitalist logic they may in fact view it more favorably. The issue at stake for Trinidadian Hindus is, counterintuitively, not necessarily the promotion of a just and classless society but rather the effective competition of their members within the existing system. Put another way, the Hindu community activists I work with are not seeking to reform the uneven access to prosperity engendered in a center/periphery global arrangement but instead seek to prove their meddle within that center dominated scheme. As Ellen poignantly demonstrates, the problem with the emerging global order of individual achievement is not the differential access to the banquet of prosperity, but rather how best to ensure her own daughter's place at the table.

Interpreting the Present, the Past, and the Present Future

The *Ramayana* class for 5-7 year olds at the Kendra is a busy place. The head instructor, Judyji, bears the countenance of a kindly matriarch, suffering the unruliness of the children with the patience of a doting grandmother. Her thin, sallow face set with soulful eyes and framed by her black and grey hair, lend her an aura of warmth and sincerity. Sitting in her class, the walls adorned with pictures of the devas and devis, I was amazed at her ability to hold the attention of the kids as she recounted stories from the *Ramayana*. She held the picture book from which the kids would soon be coloring as they listened

intently to her narration. The kids knew the story well, occasionally interrupting Judyji by predicting an event or bit of dialogue. When she launched into a rich and colorful description of Ayodhya, the city ruled by Raja (King) Dasharatra, the earthly father of Rama, the children sat in rapt attention, hanging on her every word. After describing the royal city of Ayodhya, Judyji paused and, in her thick Indo-Trinidadian dialect, asked the children if they'd like to go to there.

“Who want to go to Ayodhya”? she asked expectantly.

Sima, an outspoken girl of six raised her hand and simultaneously said, “I want to go to New York.”

“Good, you want to go to New York,” Judyji responded, clearly dismayed that her effort to bring Ayodhya to life in the children's imagination had failed.

Judyji's daily struggle is to bring to life for her young students the epic *leela*, or play, of Rama and his companions as they attempt to rescue the pure Sita from the clutches of Rawana. In much the same way that biblical stories were simplified into battles of good versus evil in the Protestant Sunday school lessons I attended as a child, so too is the *Ramayana* condensed into a series of mini narratives recounting the heroism of Rama and his loyal band as they adventure through India in an epic quest to save Sita. As the children age, the narratives, themes, and exegesis of the scripture become more sophisticated. By the time an adept and astute student has finished Shutiji's theory course at the end of high school, she will have memorized the story of Rama, will have memorized several *caupais* (verses), some in Awadhi, and will have performed the *leela* countless times. The *Ramayana* and its central themes and significations will be as familiar to her as the Nativity narrative of Jesus is to her devoutly Christian counterpart.

Indeed, her familiarity is likely even deeper in many ways because she will have memorized many of the caupais in Awadhi and Sanskrit, and it is seldom, if ever, the case that Christians in Bible camps learn both Greek and Aramaic while studying the gospels. For example, “Rama junema sukka mulah” (Rama’s birth is the source of all joy) is one of several Awadhi phrases nearly all of the children will have memorized upon graduating from Bal Ramdilla.

Sitting in on and even “teaching” several times the three courses – Judyji’s 5-7 year olds, Meenaji’s 8-11 year olds, and Shrutiji’s high schoolers – it was clear that the interpretation of the *Ramayana* was guided very much by the teachers’ sets of concerns regarding modernity, popular culture, and the difficulty of success in a deregulated global capital market. Though few would likely phrase it this way, particularly in the case of the last concern, their repeated admonitions about the tenuousness of success amounted to a tacit recognition that prosperity is an individually achieved outcome. The means by which they draw meaning and life lessons from *Ramayana* scripture follow from a paradoxical interpretation of modern global culture. Shrutiji is typically unyielding in her condemnation of popular culture, often characterizing it as meaningless and tending toward self-indulgence, yet she maintains an impressive knowledge of 1970s and 80s era pop and rock music, both American and British. And she adores Hollywood films with mystical, mysterious themes, which she asks me to bring when I come down to visit. On my last trip I brought the film *The Last Mimzy*, about a brother and sister in the 8-11 year old range who find a mysterious artifact on the beach that possesses mystical powers. Shrutiji liked the film she said because it demonstrated the wonder and mystery in the world that adults often miss because of their preoccupation with work, status, and getting

ahead. Though the Kendra mission, as with the HSS, is centered around building children into successful young adults that can compete effectively in the high pressure world of professional business and politics, here Shrutiji seems to lump personal ambition and gain as part of an ideology that distracts people from the profound mysteries of the world. The film, which has what religious studies scholars might label “New Age” themes, resonated with Shrutiji because it illustrated a truth about the mysterious powers that surround us that we routinely ignore. Shrutiji’s paradoxical interpretation of modern global public culture that, on the one hand, follows the HSS’s neoliberal dictum, “We Achieve By Our Own Efforts” and, on the other, suggests that we strive for success at the peril of our ability to perceive or imagine life’s mysteries, articulates a paradox already well established in American capitalist culture.

Appadurai’s critical inquiry into public imaginary spaces and the ways in which these spaces are altered, enriched, and expanded through transnational media accurately captures Shrutiji’s widely shared paradox. Instances and articulations of capitalist ideologies promoting individual striving and achievement abound in popular texts (Parenti 1991). Yet countless nostalgic texts also emerge lamenting our loss of a child’s sense of wonder and amazement at the world bartered away in a quest for notoriety and status (for example, *The Last Mimzy*, *Big*, any film by *Hayao Miyazaki*). Shrutiji’s paradox then is an attempt to reconcile her belief that success is borne of discipline, maturity, and constant striving for excellence and her fear that the mysterious powers that animate our world are obscured by excessive attention to the self. Shrutiji’s dualistic approach to interpreting the myriad texts of modernity is emblematic of Appadurai’s insight that local imaginative spaces are expanded by globalized media. The way in

which powerful and mysterious forces are conceived and represented in *The Last Mimzy* reflect American, middle-class, New Age articulations of what some might call the “numinous”, or primordial power. New Age spirituality’s highly eclectic and rather amorphous cosmology is itself influenced by transnationalized religious traditions ranging from indigenous cosmologies of Australia and North America to the so-called world religions and their mystical offshoots. That such an eclectic spiritual vision is coupled with a somewhat ambiguous critique of modernity, points up the paradoxical position of contemporary Trinidadian Hindus as those who both consume and resist global media. While local imaginative spaces are enriched by global media and events, those same spaces become sites of accommodation and resistance as well as, most importantly, creative translation.

Trinidadian Hindus’ interpretation of the *Ramayana* reflects the particular historical trajectory of East Indians as subjects of empire and contemporary cultural shifts inaugurated by changing relational dynamics and conceptualizations of self and other. The narratives of success so central to many Hindu community of Trinidad reflect an eagerness to participate in the highly competitive, individualizing space of late capitalism. Though years of neo-liberal policies globally instituted throughout the Reagan and Thatcher years of the 1980s up to the present have effectively dismantled market regulators that offered developing nations a fighting chance to compete against already robust economies, Trinidad’s Hindus seek not to reform the system toward greater egalitarianism but to succeed within it. In distinction to the way in which many Jamaicans have leveled trenchant critiques against an exploitative neo-imperial order and sought to reform it (Black 2003), Trinidad’s Hindus tend to see critical narratives about

and activism against differential access to power as complaining. Rather than agitating to expand the circle of privilege to include more of the world's citizens, or to attempt to erase those boundaries altogether, many of the Hindus I work with seek to pack themselves into the already crowded circle.

In an event that demonstrated to me that I had spent too much time in graduate school reading heady Marxist theory and romanticizing the potential of class consciousness, I asked Shrutiji one day about her thoughts on neo-imperialism. She had been relating to me the struggles of young people in today's social climate and how success was dependent on a strategic approach to the contemporary world. Before I could check myself, I asked in jargon-laden terms if the difficulty she described was the result of neo-imperial hegemony that creates unequal access to agency. Given how often I had heard her critique popular culture, both local and global, I thought maybe I could strike a chord. Shrutiji is an exceedingly sharp woman whose tolerance for nonsense is minimal. She knew precisely what I was getting at, but promptly refuted my suggestion. For Shrutiji, as for many of the Hindu teachers and community leaders I spoke with, the problem was not the hegemonic fabrication of an unequal system but rather a more insidious problem of a globally declining moral order that had little to nothing to do with powerful transnational actors. The amoral world her students will inherit and must negotiate largely independently someday can be linked not so much to imperial hegemony but more so to cosmological events articulated in ancient Vedic literature. In Shrutiji's analysis we are living in the time Kaliyuga, the last of the world's epochs before its ultimate destruction and recreation. I found this difficult to reconcile with her sharp and highly detailed analysis of colonial imperialist practices throughout the slavery

and indenture period. Shrutiji's savvy about colonialism and its coercive techniques of manipulation and control through deceit and division are unmatched by most of the laity. Yet her willingness to attribute contemporary local and global problems to modern forms of inequality is virtually nonexistent.

It would be tempting to locate Shrutiji's, and the broader Hindu Trinidadian community's, unwillingness to interrogate structural inequality as a symptom of ideology. On first glance, it is clearly emblematic of the effectiveness of capitalist discourse. Indeed, the Althusserian in me sees the earnest striving for membership within the circle of successful elites rather than a longing to dismantle that system as an archetypal example of the ways in which competition is naturalized as an inherent human tendency. After my discussion with Shrutiji, on the long bus ride back to Port of Spain from Chaguanas, I scribbled frantically in my notebook, wondering why Shrutiji, who articulates an uncommonly critical historiography of 19th century colonial technologies, would refuse to implicate those same powers in contemporary class hierarchies. Does she believe that Independence should be taken at face value? Did the end of formal colonialism signal for her the end of western imperialism? How could she, as well as leaders from the HSS and the Chin Maya Mission who reiterated virtually the same outlook, believe that prosperity is equally open to all when it is fairly common knowledge throughout the Caribbean that the US, among other international actors, has been meddling in regional politics and economics since at least the US control of Haiti in 1915 (Trouillot 1990: 100-102)? In the face of such overwhelming evidence supporting claims of a globalized caste/class system, how could someone as smart and observant as Shrutiji not see, at least in an impressionistic way, that the global political economy is

dominated by a handful of actors? Is this a prime example of Brackette Williams' (1991) Gramscian insight played out in the global political-economic field?

I would love nothing more than to spin a yarn detailing how I wrestled with these questions, and others besides, filing painstakingly through my catalogue of interpretations until I found a definitive and accurate answer to them. But I do not believe that that is the purpose of ethnography. As Laura Bohanan learned from her community in Africa, the heart that learns wisdom learns slowly (1956...). The purpose of my effort here is to struggle openly with questions of interpretation. On the one hand, I believe it would be hasty to dismiss a Gramscian/Althusserian interpretation that teases out the subtle mechanisms of ideological control at work in the Hindu community's unwillingness to interrogate critically the present arrangement of capitalism that to my mind structure inequalities. The sensationalization of prosperity as articulated by American standards and broadcast through global media has clearly gained purchase in countless public imaginary spaces. The anthropology of globalization provides rich testament to the massive aesthetic shifts throughout the world in this regard (see, for example, Ina and Rosaldo 2002). On the other hand, however, the people I work with, to borrow a term from Stuart Hall, are not dupes. To the contrary, the teachers, program designers, activity leaders, pundits, and visionaries I spend time with are astoundingly bright, creative, alert individuals. They translate, interpret and negotiate modernity in ways that suggest more than idiosyncrasy but also an alertness to the pitfalls of both too much ambition and, of course, not enough. While they want their students to be successful, here in the standard sense of capital accumulation, they also fear a loss of tradition that is more than mere ethnic nationalism. Loss of tradition in this sense is also a loss of self-actualizing values

that transcend the quotidian concerns of personal achievement. Losing contact with one's tradition, in this instance a Trinidadian Hindu tradition, is to lose sight of self-sustaining, empowering practices and values. The present and the "present future" then, as Rabinow has it, are read through a lens colored by a certain longing for tradition. And yet at the same time, that tradition is read through a lens colored by present interpretive practices and imaginative shifts whose provenience is local and global.

The contemporary needs of Trinidad's Hindus center around confronting and defeating cultural tendencies that lean toward apathy, pleasure, and excesses of all kinds. The inevitably declining moral order we must endure signals for the Kendra's teachers a greater need for the lessons of the past. Shrutiji's *Ramayana* theory class is for the students an intensive study in scriptural exegesis and meaning and tradition. For me, the class was an intensive study in eisegesis and the *contingency* of meaning and tradition. To listen to the Kendra's teachers, particularly Shrutiji in her theory course, is similar to how I have often imagined lessons from Confucius. Like Confucius, the teachers lay a heavy emphasis on the ancients, imploring students to study them as exemplars of moral fortitude and intellectual acuity (Fingarette 1998). If in the past the story of Rama and his companions was an exemplary and inspirational tale for exploited and impoverished indentured workers in the face of colonial oppression, today it serves as a model for inspiring perseverance in the face of cultural forces that encourage carelessness and hedonism. "In ancient times", Shrutiji tells her class, "people were nice to one another. They were also kind and appropriate. We have lost that tradition. We are not as polite to one another as we should be. People of ancient times had nice words to describe one another." This is more than simply an elder's nostalgia narrative lamenting the passing of a

romanticized age. Rather, given the context in which this emerges, we must also see it as a means of contesting a social order she finds problematic. Whether or not people have become less civil is immaterial, what lies behind the motivation to interpret the past and ancient scripture in this way is what underscores her interpretive techniques and biases.

As further evidence that moral degradation is the way of the world, Shrutiji also informed us that humans are smaller and weaker than they were in ancient times. Our communicative abilities are poorer and as such we can no longer communicate with other species as we could before. We do not understand the ways of the world, of the devas and devis, and even of ourselves as we once did. Our once robust and giant physiques have dwindled over the ages into the feeble, often sickly bodies we have now. Our powers of comprehension have been compromised by an increasing emphasis on pleasure. We do not live nearly as long as we once did. In short, we are weaker, spiritually and physically, than our ancient ancestors. If there is any consolation in this dreary news it is that the devas and devis cut modern humans some slack for their weaknesses and temptations. We cannot be held to the standard of the ancients whose many powers and talents far surpassed ours. Nonetheless, we have not been granted free passes. Failure is an ever-present shadow. Success is the reward of the vigilant. And we achieve by our own efforts. Given our spiritually and intellectually debased state, it is easy to fall victim to vulgar epicureanism, to hedonism and drunkenness in an effort to avoid life's difficulties and pain. Since the time of indenture the tool that Trinidad's Hindus have used to remain morally strong in the face of oppression, exclusion, and temptation is the *Ramayana*.

More than Sacred Text

The Prarthana opens with a blessing to Baba Tulsidas, regarded by teachers of the Kendra as “the Father of the Hindu Caribbean”. *Te dhanya Tulsidas aas/bihai je hari ranga rai* (Blessed is Baba Tulsidas who is enrapt in Shri Rama). The veneration of Goswami Tulsidas, whose murti (statue) stands at the center of the deva sthaan (shrine area), is intended to remind students of the great gift of insight he bestowed through his interpretation of Valmiki’s *Ramayana*. It is also a reminder of where they come from and how they landed in the Caribbean in the first place. As Raviji explained to me, most of the Indians coerced onto the Caribbean bound ships by the arkatis hailed from India’s northern states. One of the most popular recruiting regions was the sugar producing state of Uttar Pradesh, also the home of Goswami Tulsidas. The poet Tulsidas then is both a link to their ancestral homeland and symbol of insight and creativity as oracle of Lord Rama.

In writing the *Ramacaritamanasa* in vernacular, Tulsidas opened early versions of Rama’s life and adventures to a much broader audience of commoners. His poem, which casts Rama as a divine being and direct avatar of Vishnu, became hugely popular throughout India, upsetting *Ramayana* purists who sought to protect the devotional text from interpretive corruption (Martin 2005: 192). As popular scripture the *Ramacaritamanasa* sought to reconcile longstanding interpretive and devotional divisions within Hinduism. Tulsidas’s devotional poem bridged *nirguna* (God without qualities, or Brahma) and *saguna* (God with qualities, i.e. avatars/devas and devis) interpretive traditions as well as the two major strands of devotional practice, *advaita* (contemplative worship) and *bhakti* (devotional worship) (Martin 2005: 192). By refashioning the

Ramayana as a popular text, accessible to the laity and thus open to all, Tulsidas stripped advaita elites from their interpretive monopoly of key sacred texts. Because of the accessibility of the epic, Tulsidas's *Ramayana* was and remains hugely popular with Hindus within India and throughout the diaspora. The compelling battle between classic archetypes of good (Rama and his companions) and evil (Rawana and his Rakshasas) has spawned *lilas* (plays) performed by Hindu communities throughout the world, films, countless TV programs – starting with Ramanand Sagar's unforgettable 1987 version – and comic books.

Writing in vernacular for Tulsidas was not simply a matter of translation – it was, at the time, a radical act of interpretive subversion. Not only did the epic poet rewrite the post-Vedic era text to bring it to a broader audience, perhaps more importantly, he refashioned its narrative arc, thus for the times, modernizing it. As with other interpretations of the *Ramayana*, Tulsidas conceived of the text in a fashion particular to his cultural-historic time and place. By reconceiving the text in such a radical way, he opened new pathways of approaching and reading sacred scripture. Tulsidas was not the first reader and writer to reimagine ancient Hindu scripture, but he remains one of the most memorable in the minds of Hindus. His effort inaugurated novel renderings of the text that show little sign of letting up. Ironically, however, a substantial faction of Hindus are very particular about how the *Ramayana* is to be read and performed. The Kendra, one of Trinidad's most popular performers of the Ram Leela (local spelling), draw inspiration from theologically conservative groups such as the RSS whose performances of the *Ramayana* follow strict standards and well-established protocol.

In the parallel universe of western popular culture discourse, Paul Willis, responding to high culture theorists alarmed at the debasement of civilization through mass culture media, wrote that critiques of popular culture and its consumers from both the left and the right “ignore the dynamic and living qualities of everyday culture and especially their necessary work and symbolic creativity” (2007: 241). Willis’s work was concerned with demonstrating the creative process inherent in human activity, which includes consumption of the material commodities and symbolic media that permeate mass culture. As Willis succinctly states his case, the play of consumption includes work (2007: 242). In other words, an integral feature of consumerist processes necessarily involves the work of symbolic creativity. Cultural processes, Willis insists, cannot be easily reduced to mere repetition, gullibility, or mindlessness. Reductionist models that situate consumerism as exploitation, as discourse from the left articulates it, or as a dumbing down of the masses, as the right argues, overlook the myriad micro-processes of creative work that go into every subject-object interaction. Willis is right to state that “there is no such thing as an autonomous artefact capable of printing its own intrinsic values, one way, on human sensibility” (2007: 243). Willis’s attention to the details of language here demonstrates his keen marksmanship. By inserting the seemingly insignificant two-word phrase “one way” Willis captures a Hegelian understanding of the complex relation between the comprehending subject and the symbolic object. For what is outside the subject is always symbolic. Stated in Structuralist terms, objects encountered by the subject must always be mediated, a process which necessarily involves creative interpretation. Willis’s model then is helpful on several scores.

Shrutiji's ambivalent relationship to local and global forms of popular culture underscore Willis's claim that consumers of mass media do so with a heightened sense of creativity, not a diminished one. Following Stuart Hall, Shrutiji's frustration with representations of and appropriations from Hindu iconography and cosmology on the one hand, and her adoration of New Age films and certain rock bands, on the other, point up the continually active intellectual processes that contain, resist, accommodate, and refashion popular texts (Hall 2007: 68-9). What the work of Hall, Willis, Raymond Williams and others allow us to do is do is recognize that contradictory processes, and even ideologies, can exist in the same imagined space. As Hall accurately frames the problem, "The danger arises because we tend to think of cultural forms as whole and coherent: either wholly corrupt or wholly authentic. Whereas, they are deeply contradictory; they play on contradictions, especially when they function in the domain of the 'popular'" (2007: 68). What Hall and Willis open up for us in the context of Trinidad's socially and largely theologically conservative Hindu communities is the possibility of recognizing how they mediate popular texts as symbols that shift conceptions of the self and other in shared imaginative spaces. Like Appadurai, the Cultural Studies approach to popular artifacts and texts allows us to apprehend creative micro-movements in cultural practices and formations without reifying one side of the agency/hegemony binary.

Additionally, though Hall's and Willis's work relates to consumer practices within a capitalist marketplace, their insights apply equally well to recognizing the critical role subjective creativity plays in the interpretation and recreation of reading and performing sacred texts such as the *Ramayana*. Trinidad's unique historical-cultural

setting, where creolization is as active a trope in the public imaginary as, say, individualism is in American public culture, promotes hybridization at every turn, despite how contested the term ‘creole’ may be. On several occasions Trinidadian Hindus related to me stories about how impressed Indian Hindus are with the vibrancy of Trinidad’s religious practices. As Raviji put it to me, “I think they are surprised that we managed to keep the traditions, that we are as much Hindus as they are.” Shrutiji backed him, saying that “Many Indians still do not know we are even here. Most never even knew about the indenture program”. Raviji went on to say that for him being a Hindu in Trinidad had privileges that he could not enjoy in India, the most central to him being the freedom to improvise, recreate, and creatively interpret – in a word, to creolize – Hinduism. Upon returning to Trinidad in the early 1980s after ten years of study with the conservative RSS in India, Raviji quickly established programs founded on and in some cases nearly identical to those he experienced in India. However, he also began the process of indigenizing the fundamentalist brand of Hinduism he studied for a decade. Facing no theological authority, no public sentiment that insisted on prescribed forms of religious practice, and no governing body that regulated how he interpreted, practiced, and taught Hindu texts and worship, Raviji was free to implement programs, art forms, and ritual practices in ways that suited Trinidad’s bakhti oriented Hindu community.

The Kendra’s performance of the Ram Leela that began in 2004 was a natural outgrowth of the central role the *Ramayana* plays in Trinidadian bakhti worship. It must also be seen, however, as an outgrowth of the creative ways in which several of Trinidad’s Hindu communities use sacred scripture as means of promoting individual achievement and community empowerment. To use a popular text in this fashion is to

also recast it to fit the symbolic and ideological contours of the community. It is in this sense that Kendra and HSS leaders and teachers resemble Liberation theologians of Latin America whose interpretation of key biblical passages reflect the social-political-economic context of impoverished Christians. Just as the Latin American context of colonial oppression gave rise to interpretive forms that challenged western cultural imperialism on its own terms (Morkovsky 1997), so too does *Ramayana* interpretation function as a means of combating cultural forms and practices that Hindus find spiritually destructive. While the contexts between Central and South American Christian communities and Trinidadian Hindus are obviously quite different, the way in which those contexts exert influence on interpretations of scripture remain startlingly similar. For Latin American Christians frustrated with western cultural dominance, Liberation Theology was not only a means of indigenizing the Europeans' own scripture but, equally as important, it was a means of mobilizing communities to fight injustice. Likewise, to view the persistent centrality of the *Ramayana*, or any other Hindu scripture, as cultural preservationism or identity maintenance would be to miss the critical role these texts play in negotiating dominant local and global cultural forms. The longer I sat in Shrutiji's *Ramayana* theory class the more parallels I saw with certain features of Liberation Theology.

Liberation Theology, like Rastafari, was a profound act of political-symbolic subversion as it appropriated the Bible as the people's text. Using a mostly Marxist influenced interpretation, Liberation theologians focused on God's incarnation as a working class, marginalized laborer who came to liberate the oppressed, the dispossessed, and downtrodden from the heel of imperialism (Morkovsky 1997: 528-9). By reading the

Bible almost as a handbook of both political and spiritual liberation, Liberation Theology subverted European interpretive hegemony that had situated salvation as a process requiring acceptance of a western worldview. Similar to Rastafari practice (Chevannes 1998: 27-8), Liberation Theology read stories of captivity, exile, and even exodus, as events that spoke to their condition under European imperialism. For both Liberation Theology and Rastafari, the eventual liberation that God promises the Israelites is the same liberation those suffering under the yolk of European oppression can expect. Thus, these readings of scripture are not simply adaptations to local contexts, they are a means of situating their own plight in the historical trajectory of oppressed peoples outlined in the Bible. As Morkovsky reminds us, the object of Liberation Theology “is not to adapt the Bible to present situations but something more radical: to reinterpret scripture from their personal experience as human beings, believers, and [a] church” (1997: 529). The *Ramayana*, of course, is not a western text – at best it was a literary curiosity of the Orient – and therefore not as symbolically radical as indigenous readings of the Bible. However, what Liberation Theology, Rastafari, and certain Trinidadian Hindus share is an attempt to use scripture as both historical insight and tool of political/social mobilization and community empowerment.

Shrutiji’s theory class is intended to be a close, detail oriented study into the *Ramayana*. I spent countless hours as a student in the class, my back sweating against the vinyl chair as I madly noted each day’s lesson. On most days Shrutiji wrote on the board, or had a student take dictation on it for her, charting complex concepts, terms, and definitions with grids circumscribing each category. I was surprised at the level of difficulty involved in the lessons. For example, on one day we covered Vishnu’s Ten

Avatars from his first as a fish (*matsya*), to his last as the being “yet to come” (*kalki*). On another day we covered the Sixteen Sanskars, or spiritual development practices and rites to be conducted from the conception of a child (the *garbhadan sanskar* involving prayer for child’s well-being) to the death of the student at old age (*antayeshti sanskar*, a mortuary rite involving cremation so that the *atman*, or soul, is not tempted to linger after death). The names for the sanskars were delivered in Sanskrit, which the students were expected to pronounce flawlessly. Additionally, students were asked to memorize certain lines of the *Ramayana*, often in Awadhi, and recite them to Shrutiji to her exacting standards. More challenging than the rote memorization, however, is the expectation that students understand the difficult concepts that Tulsidas worked into his epic poem from Hindu cosmology. Adding a layer of intellectual difficulty, Shrutiji would routinely ask the students to relate one of these concepts from the *Ramayana* to contemporary events and trends. I could see some students bending under the pressure. When addressing Shrutiji and the rest of the class students must rise, stand straight, and speak their thoughts clearly in Standard English (or at least a close approximation thereof). Students that giggle, look to their friends, or answer sheepishly are promptly reproached and made to stay standing until they answer a question or repeat a phrase correctly. Not once did I see Shrutiji let a struggling student off the hook.

The lesson on the birth of Rama as the seventh avatar of Vishnu illustrates the way in which contemporary readings of the *Ramayana*, and the changing Hindu cosmology within it, can be contextually located. As with almost every lesson Shrutiji gave, her treatment of Rama’s birth involved numerous references to contemporary events and popular texts. In this instance the birth of Rama lesson gave way to her

dissertation on why the film *Avatar* is problematic and how its twisted presentation of heavenly incarnations misapprehends the divine process. In nearly every instance where Shrutiji related an important concept from the *Ramayana* or the Hindu complex, it was accompanied by a discussion or critique of contemporary cultural practice, popular texts, or both. In contrast to many Christian groups in the United States that employ such tactics, Shrutiji did not make these popular references in an effort to make scripture relevant to a modern young audience. Her goal was not to appear trendy or hip in order to entice the students to like her more or entertain a more favorable view of *Ramayana* themes. The very idea that Shrutiji would seek the children's approval by referencing what is essentially their popular culture is inconceivable to me. Her unwavering aura of professionalism, her almost Victorian sense of propriety, and her steadfast view of herself as the students' teacher, not friend, precludes the possibility of her using popular culture as subterfuge for scriptural lessons. Shrutiji is much more direct than that. By citing popular texts, cultural forms, and power relations (western imperialism, Christianity vs Hinduism, ethnic relations) I understood her objective as an effort to demonstrate how students might understand their situation in light of the *Ramayana* and, furthermore, apply its principles as exemplified by Sri Rama to succeed against formidable opposition. Here again though it must be noted that she rarely spoke in pejorative terms about popular culture *in toto*. Indeed it would make little sense for her to do so because, like so many other Hindu community leaders in Trinidad, the purpose of Hindu education is not to create a generation of turncoats who resist mass culture but rather individuals who succeed within it and, at least locally, participate in reshaping it. It is in this sense that the Kendra, as well as the HSS, embodies Gilroy's notion of double consciousness. When

Shrutiji stands before her high school students in the *Ramayana* theory class, lecturing on the ages old Vedic concept of sanskars and seamlessly relates that concept to contemporary practices, she stands between ancient tradition and modernity, India and Trinidad, communalism and neo-liberalism, nationalism and multi-culturalism.

A particularly salient instance of counter posing *Ramayana* themes against contemporary cultural struggles was Shrutiji's treatment of Rama's birth. In this discussion, Shrutiji opened the lesson with a description of *Ramnameen*, the celebration "of the actual birth and *rebirth* of Rama every year. Because he's coming again and again and again." Here, as with many of Shrutiji's lessons, I thought I detected a thinly veiled jab at Christians' self-appointed monopoly on the concept of a godhead's divine rebirth as a source of salvation. Shrutiji's soteriological lesson contains creole elements that reflect both the interpretation's influence from Christianity (perhaps to some degree by way of the Arya Samaj, see chapter 1) and the importance of Rama as a model of behavior in the face of destructive forces. I do not think it would be accurate or fair to suggest that Kendra Hindus, or those of the Arya Samaj for that matter, view Rama as salvation from the morally destructive temptations of Rawana as mimesis of the Christian cosmic battle between Satan and God in the struggle to harvest human souls. Rawana and his Rakshasas are, however, certainly used as metaphors of moral corruption. Rama's initial birth and continual rebirth is to help, in Shrutiji's terms, "take beings across the ocean of samsara" (the cycle of birth and death). Identifiable in Shrutiji's treatment is a micro-event whereby an instance of western religious influence in the form of soteriology (see Bhatt 2001: 23-5) is simultaneously appropriated and resisted. The Christianization of certain features of Hinduism that Bhatt identifies in 19th century nationalist movements

in India is evident here as an undercurrent of human relationships with the divine. At the same time, this creolized form is also challenged by a subtext of primary origination as it articulates salvation (a largely Christian concept) in distinctly Vedic and post-Vedic terms, in this case Rama as one who carries beings from the pain and suffering of samsara to *moksha*, or divine transcendence.

As we can see, the challenge for many of the instructors of Hinduism in Trinidad is, as Gilroy has put it, to face two directions at once, to embody a double-consciousness. They must adapt readings of scripture, whether it is the *Ramayana*, *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Puranas*, or Vedic texts, to modern, creole audiences while, at the same time, adapting the modern audience to the ancient texts. Modernity, in all its guises and implications, exerts an unquestionable influence on the interpretive practices of Trinidad's Hindu communities. The way in which modern apparatuses, ideologies, representations, and conceptual practices have altered publically shared imaginative spaces is evident in contemporary hermeneutics of the *Ramayana*. Similarly, the way in which several of Trinidad's Hindu communities interpret modernity and its rapidly changing contours, is given shape by an effort to preserve and promote ancient interpretive practices. Preservationism then shares space in the Hindu imaginary with innovation, adaptation, reinvention and creative translation. Just as modern popular culture texts are read in light of efforts to preserve certain features of Hinduism, so is the *Ramayana* read in light of the changing imaginative possibilities opened through popular culture.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: IMAGINED TRANSNATIONALITIES

I am, of course, sympathetic to this oppositional desire to affirm the humanity of the subaltern, but I have a doubt that the story of resistance and agency this line of argument promotes is the best hope we have in this postcolonial present.

~ David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*

[Heidegger] says, about Science, there are people who study anthropology and write anthropological books. He says they get a lot of facts and put them together but there is nothing to it. I accept that.

~ C.L.R. James, *Wilson Harris – A Philosophical Approach*

In his deftly argued book *Conscripts of Modernity* (2005), David Scott maintains, following historian Hayden White, that the poetic forms of a narrative determine that narrative's contents. Tragedies fashion narratives in one way, Romances in another. For Scott, the problem of critical Caribbean historiography, and of anthropology for that matter, has long been a focus on the oppressive brutality of colonialism and the creative resistance of its unwilling subjects. The writing of West Indian history as “a longing for total revolution”, he contends, forecloses on opportunities to conceptualize alternative constructions of Caribbean societies. Scott's motivation is not to deny or minimize colonialism's legacy of harsh exploitation but rather to interrogate the forms and questions scholars and writers use to understand West Indian pasts, presents, and futures.

If the forms of narrative...have built into their linguistic structures different myth-models or story-potentials, and if different stories organize the relation between past, present, and future differently, it may be important to inquire into the relation between the poetic form and the conceptual and ideological content of historical discourse. Historically minded criticisms of colonialisms seem to me to have something to learn from this idea. (2005: 7)

The key link here is between “the poetic form and the conceptual and ideological content of historical discourse.” The “longing for total revolution”, as Scott has phrased

it, among West Indians eager to distance themselves from European domination and recreate distinctly Caribbean forms, has generated a body of historical and social science literature¹ that continually hinges on the oppression vs. agency, or domination vs. resistance binary to the exclusion of other social constructions. Prevalent among scholars of West Indian history and anthropology is an overdetermined model of resistance that stages anti-colonialism as the principle logic of Caribbean social constructivism. The focus point of these narratives is on creative agency, and the background always colonialism's artificial societies. Modern West Indian history then is continually cast as an epic, often tragic, struggle between oppressor and oppressed, the dominant and the subaltern, the center and its alter/native, as Kamau Brathwaite has it (cited in Edwards 2007: 2).

What stands out in this critical interrogation of West Indian history for an observer of purported Hindu nationalism is first, that the longing for total revolution has never been evident among the East Indian migrants to the Caribbean (indeed, the opposite can be, and has been, noted), and second that the discourse exploring the oppression/agency binary excludes the East Indian presence and their historical narratives of colonialism. If, as Scott has noted, the poetic form of literary and historical narratives determines content, Trinidadian Hindus' adaptive approach to reading, translating, and using popular culture is indicative of movement away from longing for total revolution. In other words, the poetic form crafted and operationalized by Indo-Trinidadians since the late 19th century to the present is neither tragedy nor revolutionary. The poetic form might better be labeled epic, evidenced in the parallel and often intertwined histories of

¹ For a critique of anthropological work in this vein, particularly of Mintz, Price, and Thornton, see Scott 2005: 108-12.

the East Indians in the New World and the *Ramayana*. The epic narration of the Indian presence in Trinidad indicates not a longing for rebellion or total revolution but an eagerness to participate in and be viewed as equal partners in social constructivism.

If the poetic form of Indo-Trinidadian historiography (especially ethno-historiography) can be labeled epic, the content of such narrations is rife with themes of adaptation and progress even as they look to the past, often the mythic past, for guidance. The Romantic narratives of “overcoming” and “vindication” cited by Scott in common West Indian literature and history are not as clearly evident in Indo-Trinidadian ethno-history. In contrast, one finds narratives of an almost epic adventure and of admirable striving in the face of adversity. The themes of epic adventure, of striving, and of progress, neatly fit the worldview and historiography that situate Indians as intellectual pioneers and as cultural and literary innovators every bit equal to, if not in some cases superior than, Europeans. This is not to say that Indo-Trinidadians do not treat in great detail the trickery, coercion, exploitation, and brutality they faced as victims of the indenture system. Histories chronicling the grisly details and grim lives of indentured servants abound. Yet what lives in the Indo-Trinidadian historical imagination, particularly of the Hindus reading and performing the *Ramayana*, is a historical narrative with more epic and less tragic dimensions. Their history is more hero’s journey (as is the *Ramayana*) and less baleful tragedy (cf. Aimé Césaire’s *Une Tempête*²1975 [1969]). Part of the appeal of the *Ramayana* stems from its emergence from the Indian state many

² *Une Tempête* is Martiniquan poet Aimé Césaire’s adaptation of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. Caliban in Césaire’s version is a black slave forced to suffer the indignity and brutality of his white master, Prospero. Like C.L.R. James’s framing of Toussaint L’Ouverture, Caliban rejects peaceful means of overthrowing his white master and violently rebels to restore his freedom.

Indo-Trinidadians were recruited from (Uttar Pradesh). More central though is the similarity of Rama's exile from Ayodhya and his quest to subdue the forces of destruction, which suggests that history in the New World for Hindu Trinidadians is one of a conquest over powerful negating forces and the fortitude and determination to continue striving in the face of adversity.

The theme of resistance against imperialism, evident in certain histories of India during British occupation, of the New World indenture program, and of the plantocracy, is further complicated by many Trinidadian Hindus' alignment with western principles and ideologies commensurate with late capitalism. When a student in Shrutiji's high school class asked if women should have all the rights of men, Shrutiji replied that the Hindu perspective on men and women is that there is no difference between the two. As an example she pointed out the Shiva/Paravati divine androgyne (*Ardhanarishvara*). Ironically, she went on to reproach men for not being as strong (emotionally? physically?) as they used to be. "Men want to go out and lime and go to bars and kill themselves drag racing. They want to be little boys forever." She then tied her paradoxical critique of sexuality and wayward masculinity to the original question stating that "the dharma is important, not rights. Rights are selfish. Concern with what is fair will make you petty." Resistance then is not directed against unfair treatment, or unequal laws, or differential access to power and agency, but rather against the undisciplined practices sanctioned by the libidinal economy of Trinidad's loose morality³. It is within this thematic context that we can see that the mobilization of historical narratives involving colonialism is not to underscore Indians' radical and creative resistance of

³ I take the notion of a libidinal economy from Žižek (1992), a useful concept in Trinidad.

British imperialism but more so to indicate their success through discipline, devotion, hard work, and ultimate yet tenuous success in the face of adversity. In other words, the history of Indo-Trinidadians is a didactic, in some tellings even heroic, epic no less than the *Ramayana*.

Despite their resistance to Trinidadian morality, or lack of it as they see it, the Hindus of Central Trinidad are not turncoats, fashioning a culture independent of the Afro-Creole public culture of North. The Hindus here are neither steadfast resisters of Trinidadian popular culture nor passive consumers of it, but rather participants in the delineation of its parameters and the shaping of its forms and contours. They are actors, in the fullest sense of the term, acting as those that perform a Hindu self within a visible space and as those who interpret and act on the representations, ideals, and values in currency within the shared space of the public imaginary. The Kendra's programs – the line formations, *Ramayana* rehearsals and performance, Shakha, pichakaaree – can be viewed collectively as signaling shifts in ideological and interpretive domains both shared and contested in Trinidad's Hindu community. Following Rabinow I see the Kendra's pedagogy, with its emphasis on fashioning disciplined subjects by means of a creolized Hindu practice, as a micro-event interpreting, responding to, and attempting to participate in the shaping of public culture in Trinidad. But it is not only Trinidadian popular space that the Kendra interprets, responds to, and attempts to shape. Kendra participants are also affected by transnational flows of ideas, concepts, power dynamics, commodities, and people. Since colonialism, Trinidad has been a participant in these flows and as such has existed also in the abstract-conceptual space of the northern metropolitan powers. Kendra leaders, along with many other Trinidadians, share an

abiding concern with rectifying and reshaping an image they fear is too often reinforced by the “culture of the continual Carnival” and a lack of discipline in politics and other areas of social life. Just as Eric Williams had attempted to impose austere disciplinary measures on his newly formed PNM party in 1956 in the attempt to prove to the colonial office that Trinidad can be self-governed (Ryan 2009), so too is the Kendra eager to dispel the notion, among Trinidadians and the broader global community, that Trinidad is little more than an island of perpetual indulgence. The point is that while Trinidad’s Hindu community is a subject of influence by transnational flows it is also an active participant in those flows as they attempt to shape, or reshape, knowledge circulating in the global economy of ideas.

The Kendra’s active and often critical participation in imagined spaces lends credence both to Appadurai’s (1993) notion that rapid shifts in media promote cultural change on global and local levels as well as to Ulf Hannerz’s (2002: 37-45) position that there are asymmetries between the center and periphery in the production of meaning. In other words, local “structures of meaning”, as Hannerz phrases it, are altered in unpredictable ways. Center-based knowledge production is therefore never totally hegemonic as it is interpreted, negotiated, and used idiosyncratically. Shrutiji uses and draws on some features of globalized popular culture; others she discards or virulently opposes and plenty of it she ignores. The texts and artifacts of popular media she extracts, either for use or criticism, are always/already contingent on, among many other things, her ideological agenda and ever-changing interpretive lens. Shrutiji’s relationship to these

texts and artifacts is never passive (true, most likely, of all consumers⁴) as she actively resists certain representations, such as of Hindus (the Wendy's ad) or Hindu cosmology (James Cameron's *Avatar* film), and energetically embraces others as examples of proper conduct and right relationship (*The Last Mimzy*).

In Ulf Hannerz's prescient articulation of public culture, "world cultural flow, it appears, has a much more intricate organization of diversity than is allowed in a center-periphery structure with just a handful of all-purpose centers. A further issue...is to what extent the peripheries indeed talk back" (2002: 39). Shrutiji's irritation with the notion that "anytime is Trinidad time" and her commitment to rectifying that view in the imaginary of the "global ecumene", is her committed attempt to talk back. That is, Shrutiji's effort to shape disciplined subjects who value punctuality, professionalism, attention to detail, and commitment to hard work, and who consume popular media critically, is not only an ideological position engendered by global capitalism but also an attempt to participate in global structures of meaning. That Kendra pedagogy employs, discards, and criticizes flows of meaning, representations, and concepts, indicates not only asymmetrical flows but also critical participation in local and transnational imagined spaces. Their participation in what we might call imagined transnationalities demonstrates more than a simple binaristic model of consumption that is either passive or resistant. Rather it involves a measure of both in addition to creative interpretation, critical interrogation, didactic use, and symbolic recreation.

⁴ I appreciate Appadurai's observation in this regard that "the imagination has broken out of the special expressive space of art, myth, and ritual and has now become a part of the quotidian mental work of ordinary people in many societies. It has entered the logic of ordinary life from which it had largely been successfully sequestered" (1996: 5).

My argument throughout this thesis has been that nationalism is an overdetermined category that does injustice to social processes that involve contingency, mobility, and a fair deal of indeterminacy. I believe Appadurai is right to criticize primordialist discourse for failing to consider the inevitable contingencies of ethnic identity politics. Resting as it does on a universalist framework, primordialist discourses of nationalism overlook essential micropractices of social-political life that form linkages with events and ideas occurring beyond individual societies. Inspired by much of the work from cultural studies discourse, as I have been as well, Appadurai points out that such work recognizes that “conceptions of the future play a far larger role than ideas of the past in group politics today” (1996: 145). As I have already argued, though the Kendra uses texts and traditions from the distant past to create disciplined subjects, they do so with an ever-vigilant eye to future. In other words, Kendra pedagogy is as motivated by the future as it is by the past, if not more so. That cultural studies discourse is sensitive to micro-changes in identity formation and politics, engendered by macroevents in broader circulation, allows anthropologists of identity and ethnic or religious nationalism to be equally attentive to these subtle yet important shifts. Hebdige’s (2007) study of experimentation with style and identity is applicable, I would argue, not only to western subcultures such as punk rockers, but also to ethnic subcultures sharing material and conceptual space with a more dominant culture. Likewise, the work of Stuart Hall (2007; 2009; 2011) challenges us to take stock of the continual movement of expressive forms and cultural patterns that we would attempt to identify, observe, document, and analyze (Rabinow et al 2008). Appadurai’s attentiveness to linkages

between macroevents and local interpretive structures builds organically on cultural studies discourse. He writes,

Macroevents, or cascades, work their way into highly localized structures of feeling by being drawn into the discourse and narratives of the locality, in casual conversations and low-key editorializing of the sort that often accompanies the collective reading of newspapers in many neighborhoods and on many front stoops of the world. Concurrently, the local narratives and plots in terms of which ordinary life and its conflicts are read and interpreted become shot through with a subtext of interpretive possibilities that is the direct product of the workings of the *local* imagining of broader regional, national, and global events. (emphasis in original 1996: 153)

Appadurai goes on to point out that such local readings are typically silent and practically imperceptible. However, it is within this “incessant murmur” that local structures of meaning are continually refashioned, rearticulated, and reimagined. What I have attempted to do here is listen to murmurings of concerns among a small community of diasporic Hindus in Trinidad to understand how these concerns inform their approach to pedagogy, discipline, and subject creation. My work has hinged on the “interpretive possibilities” opened up by the freeing of artistic expression, as Appadurai has it, that globalized media allows. The UNC’s generous borrowing of themes and styles from Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign is a glaring example of the localization of a global event. On a smaller, more regional or even subcultural level, the disciplinary measures carried out by the Kendra are done so with global trends and possible futures always in mind. The Kendra’s emphasis is always on participation and action in the broader community and the shaping of Trinidadian culture and lifestyle in the context of global representation.

As a final consideration I would like to suggest that we can add nuance to Appadurai’s thesis by recognizing that the contingency of local structures of meaning, or

even of the process and politics of identity, rests ultimately in the shadowy domain of thought. Foucault reminds us that,

We need to free ourselves of the sacralization of the social as the only instance of the real and stop regarding that essential element in human life and human relations – I mean thought – as so much wind. Thought does exist, both beyond and before systems and edifices of discourse. It is something that is often hidden but always drives everyday behaviors. There is always a little thought occurring even in the most stupid institutions; there is always thought even in silent habits. (1994: 456)

Thought, of course, is not something cultural anthropologists study. However, attentiveness to the freedom inherent in thought, which, as Butler would argue is the genesis of discursive instability, allows, as it does Rabinow, to identify and analyze the fissures in local structures of knowledge and meaning. We are not then, as C.L.R. James (1965) accuses, simply stringing together lists of “facts”, but interpreting and analyzing the small events played out in response to larger events and contexts. If, as Foucault argues, “thinking is the freedom one has in relation to what one does, the movement through which one detaches oneself, constitutes oneself as an object and reflects on all of this motion as a problem” (cited in Rabinow 2003:47), we must attune ourselves to Rabinow’s radical yet insightful conclusion that history is only deterministic on a contingent basis. The discursive categories of race, ethnicity, and religion left as an imprint of imperial presence, have been, and are subject to ruptures, instability, and fragility. Sadly, colonial discursive categories have not been “rendered fragile” enough, to use Foucault’s term, to break. Yet the incessant murmurings and the programs they inspire of a small group of Hindus in Trinidad does indicate that those discursive forms are far from stable as they are continually reimagined, reinterpreted, and, in some cases, completely discarded.

APPENDIX A

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party (India)
DLP	Democratic Labour Party
COP	Congress of the People
DLP	Democratic Labour Party
HSS	Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (Trinidad)
NJAC	National Joint Action Committee
PNM	People's National Movement
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (India)
TOP	Tobago Organization of the People
UNC	United National Congress
UNIA	Universal Negro Improvement Association

APPENDIX B

GLOSSARY

Sanskrit, Hindi, and Trinidadian Creole terms

- Adharma – anti-dharma or unrighteousness; that which goes against the dharma or Hindu morality
- Araam – at ease
- Arkatis – Indian recruiters for the indenture program
- Bacchanal – a Creole, highly polyvalent, term usually indicating corruption or conflict between people, particularly people of high social or political standing. It can also indicate social chaos and be used in its traditional European sense to indicate a gluttonous or decadent context.
- Bhakti – devotional worship (cf. Jnana, Raja, Karma)
- Daksha – attention
- Dan – giving
- Darshan – seeing
- Devasthaan – shrine area in a mandir
- Dharma – Hindu morality
- Gana – group
- Hindutva – concept developed in late 19th early 20th century India to identify and describe a Hindu essence; associated with Hindu nationalism
- Jati – community
- Jnana – experimental, meditative worship
- Karma – 1) action; 2) type of worship or meditation involving physical work
- Lila, or leela – Ram Lila (Ramdila in Trinidadian creole) is the performance version of the epic poem *Ramayana*
- Liming – Creole slang for conversing, hanging out, chatting
- Mandir – Hindu temple
- Prarthana – scriptural recitation
- Raga – devotional music
- Raja – here indicating a type of meditation involving advanced tantric techniques
- Rashtra – nation
- Rishi – saint, advanced Hindu
- Sadhanas – practice, ritual, meditation
- Sanatan – eternal
- Sankhya – line count
- Sanskriti – sacred language of India
- Satsang – worship service, in Trinidad typically held on Wednesday evenings and Sunday mornings
- Shruti – revealed texts, usually referring to the Vedic texts.
- Smriti – heard texts, usually referring to post-Vedic texts such as the epics the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* as well as the Puranas
- Steup – sucking of teeth to indicate indifference
- Svasthaan – line formation

Utishta - stand
Vedanta – Hindu philosophy

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