Our Caribbean
A GATHERING OF LESBIAN AND GAY WRITING FROM THE ANTILLES

Edited and with an Introduction by Thomas Glave
Time passes. Switzerland is forgotten.
The Negro soldiers get orders to move north and drop the men at a way
station where displaced people wait.
The two are processed.
The linguist is returned to his adopted country.
The Italian is made a prisoner of war.
The linguist says, "When this is all over I will send for you."

This is a slender thread.
In the end it is no use.
The beloved hangs himself shortly after he is taken prisoner.
The linguist, this being postwar New York City, gets a job in the kitchens
of Waldorf-Astoria. He translates for the Hungarian chef.
When he hears of the Italian's death he breaks down.
He is committed to the Metropolitan State Hospital where he will die.

A man is seated under a silk-cotton tree in the Blue uniform of the dead.
There are no silk-cotton trees anywhere near this place.
Epiphytes — plants that live on air — suspend themselves above his head. Bromel-
ias whose sharp pink blooms last months.
The rainforest just beyond the man in mud dress reminds him of the forest where
they hid, two men trying to be safe. But his mind's eye moving closer he notes the
difference.

In a contest — in a fancy dress parade of Green — the rainforest would win: a
death pact between the iguana and the breadfruit.
Home.

He places the beloved on the bench beside him. They face the Green impene-
trable, listen to its suddenness of sound: shrills, howls, echoes from within brick walls.
The constructors would tie with the man in mud dress for silence.
He holds his tongue.

INTRODUCTION: LAYING OUT ETHICAL CONCERNS

The story that you are about to read is not exclusively a story of oppression; it
does, however, express a considerable amount of pain and humiliation.
The process of articulating so as to ask other men, or bullies, to make public
their stories is an attempt to assert and broaden the reality of black male
same-sex existence in Trinidad and Tobago and other parts of the Car-
ibbean.¹ In this project the phrase "buller man" will be used to talk about men
who have sex with men, for two reasons. One, it is a term I grew up with
culturally, hence it resonates a specific set of historical events in charting my
past; two, I feel it is necessary to reclaim the term in today's culture to share
that past.

Same-gender sex, sexuality, and sexual orientation still represent a very
taboo subject area, which too many people in the Caribbean, for far too
long, have tried to erase and by proxy avoid. The absence of dialogue on
same-sex practices between black heterosexual communities and black male
same-sex communities is central to this exploration. Both bold hooks and
Audre Lorde have urged dialogue within black communities to unearth
black epistemological claims to truth and knowledge.² Dialogue, in this case,
takes place when bullers and heterossexuals meet to talk about and reflect on
their lived experiences and create social ties. Yet dialogue seems almost im-
possible — at least for now. The assertion and representation of a buller man's
existence in Trinidadian communities are essential to facilitating more humane and human social relationships.

But this essay will be limited to the history and memory of a buller man's past from the 1970s to the early 1990s. I recognize that in reading my story of pain and humiliation, the readers may become voyeurs of the exotic other. This process may objectify my life and present my experiences as entertainment. This inevitable danger raises a number of questions: Does the academic and political project of this work justify the public presentation of this pain? How can readers work to overcome the possibility of becoming voyeurs?

I urge readers to reflect on these questions and to ask themselves consciously how they might be complicit with my story. The problems of voyeurism and objectification become greater whenever someone presents excerpts of his own or other people’s lives and codes them into data. The presentation of this material to people who have not experienced how bullers live raises a number of ethical concerns. The researcher and the reader should adopt an ethical stance in their analytical practices and in their reading. They must be willing to analyze critically the ways in which their failures to challenge heterosexual oppressed practices affect the lives of bullers or gay men. All of us should attempt an analysis of personal complicity with the oppression that I experienced every day while living in Trinidad and abroad.

Academic writers have an obligation to account for the type of framework that they use. Because of my social location and my professional and personal commitment to social justice, I must as a buller man work for positive change. When we engage in work to which we are personally committed, our academic contributions are more likely to come out of a creative, politically engaged self, one that adds social to academic purpose. In pondering how to narrate my gay life in Trinidad and how to make connections with others, I decided to engage in a history and memory testimony of my gay youth while in Trinidad, employing the framework of Audre Lorde's biomythography. I hope this approach will allow me to elucidate similarities and differences with other men who share and have shared a similar location, towards the goal of social change. As Trinh Minh-ha has put it, "The place of hybridity is also the place of [our/my] identity." Identity is never fixed; that is, it is fluid and continuously changing, hence suspect. My awareness of the complex issues involved when I make my life public has, I believe, informed my ethical approach to this project.

In Gayatri Spivak’s terms, I see myself as subaltern, representing self and relating to other similar, yet unique experiences in a developmental exploration of other bullers’ lives and identities. All representation is constructed and hence partial; it will never be virtual, will never fully reproduce “reality.” It is always interpreted by a particular system of thought — typically, by a heterosexual structure of dominance. Trinidad’s nationalistic, hegemonic, heterosexual community contains structures of dominance in which heterosexism and “morality” prevail. Thus as a subaltern I speak from a contested place. This project shows how I made sense of my life within the confines of black nationalism, Trinidadian communal living, black families, and the church. It analyzes how I and possibly others suffer at the hands of a hegemonic compulsory heterosexism that, I argue, is paralyzing Trinidadian black and other communities.

THE GENRE OF BIOMYTHOGRAPHY

I am a black buller man, born in Trinidad to Caribbean parents. It is from within this ethnically rich cultural heritage — imbued from grandparents, parents, relatives, and friends — that I begin my journey. I use biomythography, as coined by Audre Lorde — meaning life story, or representation of self — to translate my experiences of heterosexual oppression into this project. The genre elucidates Lorde’s interest in using her life story to create a larger framework for other zanis. For her, the individual becomes the collective, as she recognizes the women who helped give her life substance: “A hybrid group of friends, family, lovers, and African goddesses: Ma-Liz, Delois, Louise Briscoe, Aunt Anni, Linda, and Genevieve; Ma-wu Lisa, thunder, sky, sun, the great mother of us all; and Afrekere, her youngest daughter, the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, whom we must all become.” In this sense Lorde enables the move from the singular (I) to the collective (we) in black autobiographical writing. Anne McClintock argues that “Lorde’s refusal to employ the prefix ‘auto’ as the single, imperious sign of the self expresses a refusal to posit herself as the single, authoritative, engendering voice in the text. Instead, her life story is the collective, transcribed life of a community of women — not so much a perfect record of the past as a fabricated strategy for community survival.”

Marlon Riggs, too, in his documentary film Black Is . . . Black Ain’t, links his individual identity with that of his grandmother’s “gumbo” — a metaphor for the plurality and rich diversity of black identities. He brings us face to face with black people — grappling with numerous, often contested definitions of black life, black oral inscriptions, and black identities. Identity here is represented as coming into being through black communities.

In a similar vein, my sense of writing, as influenced by others in the
community, continues the tradition of Lorde's biomythography and Riggs's gumbo. The absence of frameworks for bullers in the Caribbean made it imperative that I incorporate the biomythography as used by Lorde and the gumbo analysis as used by Riggs as a starting point for this project, to assist me in developing a framework to write and talk about Trinidadian gay men's lives. I do not posit myself as a single, authoritative voice. For me biomythography has been invaluable, because I am living proof of some of the experiences that some men in the Caribbean face in coming out and coming to terms with their sexual orientation. 12 To truly "question is to interrogate something from the heart of our existence, from the centre of our being." 13 As a black intellectual and buller man, I find that this genre provides greater legitimacy to my project in relationship to my community.

Yet the questions that arise are not superficial, nor do they disappear merely because I am a member of the community or am given space to write about the experience. According to Antonio Gramsci, an organic intellectual can experience and be experiencing the consequences of living from a certain social position, and can articulate a set of problems associated with the lives of himself or herself and others. Gramsci's essay, "The Formation of Intellectuals," describes organic intellectuals: "Every social class, coming into existence on the original basis of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates within itself, organically, one or more groups of intellectuals who give it homogeneity and consciousness of its function not only in the economic field but in the social and political field as well." 14

Quite simply, one must "connect" to oneself, each other, and "those others" in order to become, in the Gramscian sense, an organic intellectual. 15 The organic intellectual is one who is positioned to have experienced — and is experiencing — the particular consequences of living from a certain social position, and has articulated a set of problems associated with one's own life and other people's lives. As a result, one develops a relationship of familiarity with people and has the opportunity to think through issues in order to effect change in the oppressive heterosexist structures of dominance. For too long the silence of bullers has been deafening in its support of systemic inequalities. Struggle and the repositioning of identities are essential, especially for heterosexuals who have long enjoyed the benefits of homophobia and heterosexism. It is critical to locate myself in this project, to bring into being a self-conscious buller, within a particular set of experiences and social history, to make clear the experiences and ways of understanding that inform my theoretical framework.

There is an integral relationship between myself and other men of similar experiences to those described in this project. According to Lila Abu-Lughod, there is a "discourse of familiarity": "Others live as we perceive ourselves living not as automata programmed according to 'cultural' rules or acting out our social roles, but as people going through life wondering what they should do, making mistakes, being opinionated, vacillating, trying to make themselves look good, enduring tragic personal losses, enjoying others, and finding moments of laughter." 16 The varied, complex experience of other bullers has inspired my research and provided a forum for articulating the strength, pride, and dignity required to negotiate black communal living. In charting my biomythography, I locate myself in my childhood memories of schooling and community living, family, religion, popular culture and mass media, sports and trades, and girlfriends. In short, as a young black man in the Caribbean, I found a desperate assurance in my hypermasculinity through religion, sports, aggressiveness, loudness, having many intimate women friends, and practicing occupations or trades constructed as "manly" in my family and the community at large.

FAMILY

I am of mixed race from parents of black, Indian, and Chinese ancestral backgrounds, raised in a heterosexual nuclear family with fourteen siblings — five sisters and nine brothers. I am the fourteenth child and the youngest boy. My oldest brothers and sisters left home and immigrated to North America early in my life. As a result, the youngest five of us formed a close relationship. I grew up with my elder brothers but had very little in common with them. I felt that I could never compete with them in the arenas of sports and masculinity, so I avoided these contexts. I was very close, however, to my elder sisters, as well as to the youngest.

Within my family, discussions on same-sex relationships came up only in private and between adults. My parents raised us to embrace constructs and values that were inherently heterosexist. We were told what "clean and pure" sexuality was and which member of the opposite sex we would marry and go on to form a nuclear family with. My parents would often ask me, during my teenage years, about the girls in my life: "Do you have a girlfriend yet?" "I have never been in love with any girl." "Are you okay?" These questions were a way for them to assure themselves that I was "normal," and to signal a warning to me if something was wrong. It was always acceptable for us to talk about having more than one young woman in our lives, but if we failed to mention any young women, our parents would suggest potential girlfriends.
Most of the time our parents suggested girls who were Indo-Caribbean, light skinned, and well educated. They often told us that blacks were not a progressive group and that if we wanted to succeed in life we should avoid them. We had a black neighbor and very good friend who would compare blacks to crabs in a pan of pitch oil—as one tries to climb out, the other pulls him or her down. Parents often spoke in parables to pass messages to children, and if we did not know what they meant, they would say, “If you do not want to hear, then you would have to feel.”

Needless to say, my parents never once asked if I was interested in same-sex relationships, and would not speak about or allow any other sexual identities or opinions beyond heterosexuality. This situation imprisoned me within compulsory heterosexuality and constructed same-sex relationships as sinful, traitorous, and deviant. Lorde writes, “As a forty-nine-year-old Black lesbian feminist-socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an inter-racial couple, I usually find myself part of some group defined as other, deviant, inferior, or just plain wrong.” Within my family the naturalization of heterosexism and its cultural norm about sexuality produced and defined same-sex practices as unwelcoming and unnatural. Caribbean feminist scholar M. Jacqui Alexander has demonstrated, for example, how the “naturalization of heterosexuality as state law has traditionally depended on the designation of gay and lesbian sex and relationships as ‘unnatural.’” She further points out that there is no absolute set of commonly understood or accepted principles called “the natural” which can be invoked definitionally, except as they relate to what is labeled unnatural.

This typical, unwelcoming family environment, along with the resulting private nature of homocentric sexuality, is a reality for most bullies in the Caribbean. My family assumed that I, like my father, would marry someone of the opposite sex and have a family and maintain the family name and identity through paternity, even though I had fourteen siblings. As bell hooks has argued, black men are expected to reproduce and maintain the black family. Part of this pressure also stemmed from my close relationship with my father and his expectations of me. In many respects my father was like an elder brother to me—he trusted me, and we did a lot of things together.

When I was eight he showed me how to drive his motor vehicles and how to do basic auto repairs, something that he never did for my older brothers. He also taught me basic welding, plumbing, and masonry repair, and he would often call on me when repairs needed doing around the house or at the homes of my brothers and sisters. We also had some friends in common and socialized in some of the same places. I accompanied him to the grocery store, did market shopping with him, and paid the bills. He would often let me drive him, and was very proud of me when with his friends. When going places we would talk about local and international politics, social issues, and relatives, and each of us had very vocal opinions on most subjects. We played cards together with his adult friends, many of whom I highly respected. In Trinidad, playing cards, especially “all fours” at the competitive level, is a popular sport among males, especially on the block (a street corner) or in village competitions. My father and I were often partners at cards. I was only a teenager, and this meant a great deal to me, especially because it helped to disguise the signs of my being a bully.

Overall I thoroughly enjoyed my relationship with my father, and yet there was a sense of shame, betrayal, dishonesty, and distance that I felt because I was hiding my sexuality from him, and it caused me great pain. Despite our shared activities I never felt comfortable enough to let him know about my same-sex feelings and desires. This produced a deep ambivalence within me. I grew hesitant about working closely with him and yet hid no way of refusing. I also knew that my masculinity was secure when I was with him, because his friends would often say, “Your son is so nice; he will grow into a good man.” I felt that the tasks that I performed with him were “manly enough” to hide the signs of my emerging sexuality. Hence, I constructed a hyper-masculinized persona within the family to cover up my confusion and remain in the closet.

My relationship with my mother was very different. It mattered greatly to her that we got an education, had three meals a day, and were healthy and happy. She was a very busy woman who listened to everyone’s problems and managed the family finances. I would often turn to her for permission to go places or for money to buy clothes or food or to socialize, but she and I did not talk much about other people, political issues, or my life. She was very private, very cautious about what she said in front of us, always reminding us that if we could not say good things about someone then we should say nothing. She hated any form of gossip and was always ready to remind us that we should not keep bad company. She had instilled in me a very rigid hyper-male gender prison, which meant that I had a slightly different type of gender-raising structure, and I was often even more cautious around her than around my father. I never wanted to give her any signs or raise suspicions of my same-sex attraction for men, so I acted hyper-masculine to exhibit the persona she expected of me.

It was my mother who would chastise my behavior when she thought it stereotypically feminine; “Stop acting like a girl,” she would say. She had very
clearly defined gender roles for her children, which decided the chores that she would assign us. We boys always did the field or yard work, and the girls the housework. While our mother considered food shopping feminine, her sons had to do most of it, because it meant lifting heavy baskets or boxes of food to feed a large family. Physicality avoided signs of tenderness or femininity. The only "soft" tasks for the boys were polishing and whitening shoes for school, cleaning fish from Saturday market, shelling peas, and cleaning sorrel. Such discourses demonstrate how roles in families are always gendered, always already, in Stuart Hall’s words, underpinned by a particular sexual economy, a particular figured masculinity or femininity, a particular class identity, and so forth. The term “discourse” is used here to describe how knowledge, behavior, and practices are institutionalized in social policies and in family as an extended institution of the state. Discourses are located within relations of power and organized positions and places in the field of power. In Foucauldian theory, discourse is not just another word for speaking, but denotes historically situated material practice that produces power relations. Discourses are thus bound up with specific knowledges. My family is an example of how social knowledge about gender norms and attitudes about gays and lesbians as deviant, sick, and immoral are organized through a particular heterosexist discourse.

I always felt that my mother knew that I was a buller, and I hoped that religion or a heterosexual relationship would cure me, so that I could hide it from her. She was very particular about where I went, who called for me, and my clothes and hairstyle. For her some of these codes were central to defining appropriate male behavior. I never imagined that I could fool her, and I therefore always felt great pressure in her presence, which reminded me of her religious beliefs and their attitude towards same-sex practices.

RELIGION

It is sad indeed that we as a church have more often than not turned our back on a significant portion of God’s people on the basis of their sexual orientation. We have inflicted on gay and lesbian people the tremendous pain of having to live a lie or to face brutal rejection if they dared to reveal their true selves. But oppression cuts both ways. Behind our “safe” barriers of self-righteousness, we deprive ourselves of the rich giftedness that lesbian and gay people have to contribute to the whole body of Christ. — ARCHBISHOP DESMOND TUTU, letter to a gay and lesbian Episcopal ministry in California, December 20, 1995

Christianity is the dominant religion of most Caribbean islands, a relic of colonial rule. When community members object to same-sex relationships, they often invoke religious discourse to condemn those relationships as immoral and sinful. In Trinidad, Christian congregations have traditionally viewed and continue to view same-sex practices as sinful and, as a result, have sought to regulate these practices.

While growing up in Trinidad, I went to church every Sunday, and the pastors often referred to biblical passages condemning same-sex relationships— for example, Genesis 19; Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13; Romans 1:18–32; 1 Corinthians 16:9; and 1 Timothy 1:10. The passages in Leviticus are the most explicit: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” (18:22), and “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them” (20:13). My mother always mentioned these teachings when she saw a buller man or heard about someone thought to be a buller. I was uncomfortable when pastors spoke about marriage and “family values,” for they always found a way to talk about men having sex with men. Thus in church services and Sunday school I felt confused and ashamed, because I was aware of my sexual feelings and tendencies. However, I continued to attend services, hoping for a “cure” for my desires.

The sense of duality articulated by W. E. B. Du Bois takes on a particularly painful and specific meaning for bullers who experience powerlessness, rejection, alienation, and shame in black communal living. Although Du Bois analyzed the concept of the “Negro” in the United States, his ideas are equally applicable to black men who engage in same-sex practices and are seeking agency, acceptance, and approval within black and Trinidadian communal life.

Du Bois wrote about double consciousness, or the two-ness of being—the sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others. I always looked to family, the parish priest, and friends for approval. As a buller man I found that my double consciousness hampered my ability to make up my mind on significant issues such as same-sex sexuality, gender construction, and identity politics, or to speak out in support of buller men. Du Bois argued that with a strong cultural sense of self and a commitment and connection to African people, blacks would move beyond double consciousness. He urged us to look at the duality of conflict produced by living in an oppressive or racist society. Being both black and a buller meant harboring “two warring souls”: “A sort of seventh son, born with a veil and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-
consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. . . One ever feels his two-ness, . . . two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

The longing to attain self-consciousness, deny my same-sex desires, and merge into a heterosexual, sexualized manhood was a source of psychological confusion and moral regulation that existed inside me, two souls forever torn asunder in Trinidad.

Dennis Altman, in his classic text, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*, maintains “that societies impose upon humanity a repressive regime that channels our polymorphous eroticism into a narrow genital-centered, procreative-oriented heterosexual norm.” This confining of sexuality manufactures the illusion of sexual liberation as its social foil. It forces the subordinated to bear the social anxiety concerning repression. Gayle Rubin calls this the “erotic pyramid” of sexuality, which has heterosexual procreative masculinities at the top:

Modern Western societies appraise sex acts according to a hierarchical system of sexual value. Marital, reproductive heterosexuals are at the top of the erotic pyramid. . . . Individuals whose behavior stands high in this hierarchy are rewarded with certified mental health, respectability, legality, social and physical mobility, institutional support and material benefits. As sexual behaviors or occupations fall lower on the scale, the individuals who practice them are subjected to a presumption of mental illness, disrespectability, criminality, restricted physical and social mobility, loss of institutional support and economic sanctions.

The idea that the sexual impulse exists solely for procreation, not for pleasure, is rooted in the Bible, the Qur’an, and the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which have fostered religious interpretations and hegemonic practices that exclude same-sex relationships. Religious debates and the ongoing debate about respectability, cleanliness, and decency take on social forms—such as church, school, and family—which individuals rely on and live through. These institutions mediate the many ways in which people might view sex, sexual practices, and same-sex relationships. Within these institutions and discourses, state and non-state organizations control sexuality, sexual identity, and communal cultural identity. As M. Jacqui Alexander points out, these institutions which narrate and position gay and lesbian sexuality as unnatural also serve to naturalize heterosexuality as an implicit norm.

Because of religious and moral regulation of the body and its practices, I always felt that my identity was deployed against the subjective grounds of the dichotomies of good and evil, moral and immoral, sinful and non-sinful. In this scenario the core of consciousness, as espoused by the various black communities in the Caribbean and as instituted by schools, communal living, churches, the state, and the black family, erases the realities of gay people’s lives.

**SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY LIVING**

School represented a crucial phase for me in dealing with sexuality and coming to terms with manhood. As a teenager I listened as my schoolmates and friends expressed their hatred towards bullies. I can recall conversations with friends, both in school and in the community, that proposed violent acts such as stoning—with the intent to kill—against men whom they suspected were bullies. As Peter Noel and Robert Marriott write of violence against batty bwoys in Jamaica, “hunting batty bwoys is as instinctive as the craving for fry fish an’ dummy, a national dish. The mere sight of them can trigger the bedlam of a witch hunt. When the toaster (rapper) Hammer Mouth discovers two gay men in a garage—‘hook [hug] up an’ ah kiss like . . . meangy dog’—he hollers: ‘Run dem outta di yard!’ Murder them, advises another toaster . . . ‘Kill dem one by one. Murder dem till dem fi change dem plan.’” Likewise, as a teenager I frequently witnessed verbal and physical harassment of bullies or effeminate men in Trinidad as they walked past gatherings of men standing on the street corner. In Kingston, Jamaica, write Noel and Marriott, between 1983 and 1988 many suspected homosexuals were stabbed or shot dead. My friends and others who disliked and targeted bullies often attacked them violently. Witnessing these acts provoked the type of psychological and emotional fear I lived through as a teenager in Trinidad.

I often heard my older brothers, when we had arguments or fights, tell me to stop acting like “ah she or Reginald.” Reginald was a man whom many in the community suspected of being a bully. The reference was dismissive and reinforced the obvious fact that I was younger, not quite a man yet, and needed to be warned or policed about what not to become. When his name came up in arguments, it substituted for heterosexist oppressive language, induced guilt, and encouraged shame and emasculation. I consciously resisted arguing with my brothers, for fear that they would call me Reginald in front of my parents or friends.

Anger towards zami queens seldom surfaced, because most people ex-
pected women to carry themselves in traditional ways. Women played highly feminized gender roles, raising children, cleaning house, cooking, washing, dressing, and behaving in ways that excluded the labels “lesbian,” “manly,” or “zami.” According to Judith Butler, gender is a corporeal style, a way of acting the body, a way of wearing one’s flesh as a cultural sign. That is, it is a sign, a signifier of an underlying biological sex and a discernible sexual orientation.

Women wearing men’s overalls, or doing physical work traditionally constructed as masculine, did not challenge women’s traditional gender roles. If anything, some of the clothes that women wore reflected poverty, and it was acceptable to use them until they could afford something new. Here clothes function as visible signs of identity, subject to disruption and symbolic theft, which challenge the role of clothes as a ground for gender. Furthermore, acts such as physical aggressiveness, when a woman was fighting for her male partner, children, girlfriend, or a good friend, were reconfigured and represented as very womanly—the act of a strong woman and at the same time a girlish thing to do. Observers never assumed that a woman protecting another woman from male violence had a sexual interest in her, or that women who listened to each other’s problems had same-sex attractions. Rather, women supported one another in response to violence and shared communal experiences.

M. Jacqui Alexander calls this a “gendered call to patriotic duty. Women were to fiercely defend the nation by protecting their honour, by guarding the nuclear, conjugal family, the fundamental institution of the society” by guarding “culture” defined as the transmission of a fixed set of proper values to the children of the nation.” Or, as patriarchal black nationalists have argued, a woman’s role is omnipresent as the nurturer of Black children, the cultural carrier . . . and the teacher of the community.” Such public practices and gender expectations of black women do not correlate protective or caring behavior with sexual preference. There are very strong stereotypical roles enforced for women, but they are also blurred for women in ways that they are not for men. Within a Trinidadian community, some codes of women’s behavior allowed women to go unmarked, less rigorously policed in terms of a regulated notion of gender behavior and its connection to sexuality. The notion of what it meant to look and to be zami was not as overtly marked as what it meant to look and act as a buller man.

The stability of a man’s sexual identity would be interrogated if he wore the wrong clothes or colors, failed to participate in particular sports, or did not protect his female partner or show an interest in events constructed as “boyish” or “manish.” The sexual identity of men who stepped outside their traditional masculinized or manish roles was always in question. Yet many bullers had very good relationships with older women in the community. Some women, mostly housewives, had no problem forming close relationships with bullers. As long as the males displayed laughable, gossiping, stereotypical, flamboyant, feminine characteristics, presenting themselves less as maligned than as humorous.

Bullers have been and still are objects of contempt in Caribbean culture. They are part of a communal set of teachings and practices that involve the policing of same-sex relationships, grounded in religious canons. Today same-sex relationships and homosexuality are still illegal in most Caribbean islands, subject to the long line of oppressive “isms” in society. These “isms” have not created, for Caribbean folks, any new spaces, but continue the tradition of oppressive thinking. Heterosexism, like racism, classism, and ableism, denies people their human agency to be fully who they are. It further creates a hierarchy of heterosexual categories. In essence, heterosexism starts and operates from a paralyzing position that everyone is heterosexual, while denying the human sexual or emotional existence of those who engage in same-sex practices, identifying these practices as deviant, sick, and abnormal, as well as religiously and morally wrong.

During my teenage life, in an effort to temporarily secure my masculinity or hyper-masculinity and hegemonic heterosexuality, I participated in events such as stealing (sugar cane, cocoa, coffee pods, plums, mangos, and other fruits), breaking bottles with sling shots or stones on the street, engaging in physical fights, and “hanging on the block” with the boys until late at night. These heterosexist, hyper-masculinist constructions were ways for me both to assert and test my physical strength and to attest to my heterosexuality.

During my childhood these physical acts secured my masculinist persona. For me heterosexuality was, as Judith Butler puts it, “a normative position intrinsically impossible to embody and the persistent failure to identify fully and without incoherence with these positions revealed heterosexuality not only as a compulsory law, but as an inevitable comedy . . . a constant parody of itself.” For many of us these forms of hyper-masculinity were like walking with or having a permanent “hard-on”—necessary performances that bought our way into the communal construction of a normative masculinity, constructed through the prism of heterosexuality. Our fights usually indicated “overt disdain for anything that might appear soft or wet . . . more a taboo on tenderness than a celebration of violence,” a “matter of learning to identify being male with these traits and pieces of behaviour.”

Young
women aided young black men in maintaining this form of behavior, and sometimes ascribed status to them for being able to do all these things and not get into trouble. Furthermore, these activities demonstrated “power” to parents, women, teachers, and friends, who were proud to see that a young man was not a buller, a sissy, or a coward.

In school young men often called me “buller man” if I refused to talk about any sexual encounters with young women, harass young women, laugh at the clothing of economically disadvantaged students, play sports after school, or break l'ecole borie (skip classes). My associates saw these qualities as feminine and believed that they had the right to call me a buller. Many days I felt unsafe going to school but was afraid to let my parents know why. Homophobic violence in school and homophobia within my family left me with nowhere to turn for help or advice. On several occasions I left for school but never arrived. Throughout high school I lived in fear of men who wanted to beat me because they thought that I was a buller man. For me, acting macho was a product of what I now see as masculinized resistance, and I presented myself as tough, independent, loud, aggressive, and in control — attributes of traditional dominant gender constructions and of their definitions of manhood — in order to erase all signs of being a buller or shirley.

I also negotiated heterosexist violence by forming relationships with men who had sex with other men, who did not self-identify as bullers or bisexual, and who were constructed as heterosexuals in the community. These men were tough, big, masculine, and aggressive. No one dared to cross their paths. They were considered heterosexual because of their large frames, their hyper-masculine actions, and their heterosexual relationships. They were the “cool guys” on the block. Many young men “hung out” with them when they were going to the movies, smoking pot, going to the river to “make a cook,” playing cards on the block, or going to football and cricket matches. Most of these men also had blue-collar jobs in the auto industries, stove and refrigeration industries, or sugar cane factories — showing their masculinity, providing for the family, and forestalling questions about their sexuality. Their masculinized fronts made them appear heterosexual — true men and real brothers.

I associated with these men and confided in them in order to avoid or mitigate violence, verbal or physical. My contact with them secured me against frequent violent attacks on bullers by gangs of young men, always ready to protect their gender and hyper-masculinity. I often heard my friends talk about the beatings that they had given to men whom they caught at the river during the day, or in the savanna at night, having sex with other men. These acts of violence often had police support, leaving the victims without recourse to state or community.

These men also exposed me to a culture of same-sex sexuality through magazines and books. They confirmed and provided an avenue for my self-recognition and acceptance of myself as a buller. They also told me secrets about other men with whom they had sexual encounters or who they knew were doing it “the other way” or were swinging. My ongoing association with these men reduced my ambivalence by affirming my sexuality, and protected me from heterosexist violence. Yet they were also friends with my brothers, although I never heard my brothers interrogating their sexuality — they perfectly represented my brothers’ social construction and understanding of heterosexual masculinity. Knowing these men facilitated my understanding of my same-sex sexual desires and made me feel a bit more comfortable. I was not alone.

Despite this enabling self-recognition and my growing knowledge of my sensibilities and possibilities, my constant fear of heterosexist violence prevented any form of public expression. There was an emerging self-identification as a result of my feelings and understanding and of the way in which other people were naming me and subjecting me to violence. Violence against “queers,” argue Bill Wickham and Bill Haver, is “installed... in that ideological, lived relation termed daily life itself, as well as in the objectification, thematization and valorization of everydayness.” Compulsory heterosexuality denies many the possibility of positive self-identification. To avoid violence I embraced forms of a heterosexual identity, constructed and regulated within family, school, religion, and popular culture. As a young teenager I was able to position myself as a buller but adopted, as I show next, the appropriate heterosexist type of dress to escape violence.

**CLOTHING**

The 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s saw rigid gender-based restrictions on clothing color in Trinidad. As a man I was not allowed to wear pink, red, yellow, or any color that appeared too “flamboyant” or “bright,” for these hues were viewed as weak, feminine, “uncool” — usually worn by women, bullers, or white boys. The socially coded buller man’s body is stereotyped as “flamboyant,” “effeminate,” “flashy,” “crazy-acting,” and in some cases loud and childlike. The flamboyant buller who became friends with older black women could braid his hair, wear headbands and bright clothing, and speak...
with a feminine voice, as long as he allowed others to laugh at him and make him the village clown. As gay historian Jeffrey Weeks writes, “The male homosexual stereotype of effeminacy and transvestism has had a profound yet complex impact on men who see themselves as homosexual. No automatic relationship exists between social categories and people’s sense of self and identity. . . . The most significant feature of the last hundred years of homosexual history has been that the oppressive definition and defensive identities and structures have marched together.”

Black men who contravened these codes were always marked as bullies within our culture and community. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick states in “How to Bring Your Kids up Gay,” in Michael Warner’s A Queer Planet, “Indeed, the gay movement has never been quick to attend to issues concerning effeminate boys. There is a discreditable reason for this in the marginal or stigmatized position to which even adult men who are effeminate have been relegated to the movement.”

For black men generally, effeminophobia has always been a real threat to (their) masculinity, while for some bullies it is another way of reclaiming parts of their identity that they were taught to hate and despise. For many bullies effeminacy is “undesirable,” “blightful,” or “sinful” because black society condemns it. Yet some bullies use it to challenge misogynist and sexist practices in black cultures, performing drag or cross-dressing to express themselves. Sedgwick writes about appositional forms of sexual self-expression that challenge the traditional norms and values that imprison black masculinity and black communal living. It certainly is dangerous to resist traditional notions of masculinity. As Sedgwick writes:

A more understandable reason for effeminophobia, however, is the conceptual need of the gay movement to interrupt a long tradition of viewing gender and sexuality as continuous and collapsible categories—a tradition of assuming that anyone, male or female, who desires a woman must by the same token be masculine. That one woman, as a woman, might desire another; that one man, as a man, might desire another: the indispensable need to make these powerful, subversive assertions has seemed, perhaps, to require a relative de-emphasis of the links between gay adults and gender nonconforming children.

It is not surprising, then, that fear of violence, actual or psychological, affects the lives of men who define themselves as bullies. My actions and my fears of communal and family violence emerged from this psychological trauma of same-sex practices, which I attempted to erase through activities such as sports and trades.

SPORTS AND TRAVES

My involvement in competitive sports such as football and cricket was a means of survival. Sports offered an accepted arena in which young men could exercise their masculinized personhood and erase same-sex suspicion. Parents and teachers strongly encouraged sports. It was common to hear parents and coaches talk about how big and muscular the boys were becoming, and to hear schoolgirls scream at the display of black bodies in competitive boys’ sports.

Once while I was playing football in the savanna with my male friends, a young man walked by. My fellow players yelled out, “Look ah buller man, check he how she walking nah. Lef we go beat and kill de man nahn.” As the young man walked in fear and hope that the harassment would stop, he did not respond. My friends went up to him and insisted that he fight. His refusal led to mere name-calling and physical attacks, which left him bruised and alone. I stood and watched and did nothing.

This experience made me question my own safety and wonder how I would publicly affirm a same-sex identity and inform others of it. I started to think about how lonely my life might be if I did inform family and friends about my sexual orientation, and about the potential effects on my family and associates. I did not want to lose my male friends, who would call me “bunder” as a put-down, or further risk the violent attacks that I feared in school on a daily basis, so I continuously constructed my gender and acted in a hyper-masculine way to negotiate the homophobic and violent conditions of my daily existence. Here I am reminded of Michel Foucault, who “argued that the emergence of homosexuality as a distinct category is historically linked to the disappearance of male friendship.” As Lynne Segal writes, Foucault thought that “intense male friendships were perceived as inimical to the smooth functioning of modern institutions like the army, the bureaucracy, educational and administrative bodies.”

Even more disturbing for me, there was no protection from the state, nor were there organizations that supported bullies. My friends called me a buller when we played sports. They thought that I put too much emphasis on being clean, on getting home on time, and on resisting fights. I also remember the mother whose house stood near where we played cricket in the streets. She would tell her sons and the other young men not to pick me on their team because I did not like to get dirty, would bat and then go home, or was not strong enough, since I was a buller man. If I was selected, I tried to act like a “really tough man” and to avoid her name-calling and her children.
All my older brothers played excellent football and cricket and were very good athletes. I never mastered sports but immersed myself in them to erase all signs of femininity and possible suspicions about my sexuality. When I played football, men often made fun of me, because I could not kick the ball as hard as my brothers or because I did not score as many goals as they did. I was mostly excluded from playing except as a substitute—a position with which I became all too familiar.

It was useful to learn trades such as welding, plumbing, carpentry, and masonry in school, to be able to do basic repairs and simple construction at home. Most communities called on members for help with building a community project or a house. Men would do the physical labor, and women the cooking. The person or group helping was expected to supply large amounts of food for the workers. Sometimes those who could afford to pay for the work did so, in addition to serving food. For many men, including me, there was pride in having helped a family to build their new house by mixing cement, welding fences, or laying bricks. It also allowed men to project their masculinized selves to the community, which earned them popularity. Especially when women were around, men would often show off their strength by hauling heavy loads and comparing their accomplishments to those of others. As Ray Raphael wrote, “Our competitive initiations tend to exaggerate rather than alleviate male insecurity and the greater our insecurity, the more prone we are to overcompensating for our weakness by excessive and aggressive male posturing.”

Sports and trades were—and are—valued by Trinidadian men more than academic achievement. Many young men in Trinidad still argue that academic subjects such as mathematics, physics, and English are for bullies and women, while trades are for men. This embrace of a physical form of knowing—displaying dexterity and knowledge of one’s own body—was and is a means for young men to graduate into their black male coolness, machismo, and masculinity. Hence school, family, male communal pressure, and popular culture form and maintain social values. Raphael adds “that macho, or cool, as construction of masculinity, is just one more indication of insecurity.”

Fathers, older brothers or uncles, neighbors, friends, and relatives reminded us of how big, strong, and tough they were and how hard they worked to provide for and protect their families. They boasted about the many women in their lives. Someone who did not have as many women as they did was “sick,” suspected as a bully or not “the average young black male.” My father, however, never fit these stereotypical constructions of manhood. He was very gentle and never worried about the chores that he did in the home. Nor did he have more than one female in his life. But these stereotypes continue to frame judgments of black men.

**POPULAR CULTURE AND MASS MEDIA**

The mostly American movie genres that appeared in Trinidad in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s typically portrayed violence, stereotypes, a colonial and sexist mentality, and American heterosexual family values. Racist and colonial representations of cowboys and Indians, the black rapist, the black macho stud, or the black comedian inundated the market. Evil was invariably equated with “blackness.” We watched television shows such as *Bonanza, The Brady Bunch, Dark Shadows, Days of Our Lives, Lassie, Flipper, The Lone Ranger, Lost in Space,* and *Tarzan,* and movies such as *The Million Dollar Man* and *Planet of the Apes.* Then came the “blaxploitation” genre of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, depicting black machismo and black language/slang in movies like *Black Belt Jones; The Black Godfather; Cleopatra Jones; Coffey; Hell up in Harlem; Shaft; Baby; Shaft’s Big Score!* and *Urban Jungle.*

Kobena Mercer and Simon Watney argue, “The hegemonic repertoire of images of Black Masculinity, from docile ‘Uncle Toms’ to the shuffling minstrel entertainer, the threatening native to superspade figures like Shaft, has been forged in and through the histories of slavery, colonialism and imperialism.”

Many black Caribbean men imitated the representation they saw in the blaxploitation films, adopting codes of machismo and “black” masculinity to recoup some power over their conditions. This depiction of manhood, masculinity, and hyper-masculinity transformed the ways in which black men in the Caribbean acted and how they treated women and gays. Most of them started to wear big Afro-hairstyles, plaid pants, and high-heeled platform shoes, to adopt American and non-so-American accents, and to claim an identity that they interpreted as cool and popular. This adoption of style and politics was also partly influenced by the Black Power movements of the time; again, these were mostly driven by black American male activists. For Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson in *Black Manhood,* “cool” is the presentation of self many black males use to establish their identity... it is a ritualized form of masculinities that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength and control.

Parents caught up in the Hollywood dream started to name their children after black movie stars. This seemed to suggest that black male babies would grow up to be bodies without brains, insecure and animalistic, without
feelings or compassion. This representation reinforced existing insecurities and racist stereotypes already facing black men in the Caribbean, which had originated with slave masters who defined, labeled, racialized, and sexualized black men and women as “other” without understanding, valuing, or respecting them.

In 1970 Trinidadian and Caribbean popular television culture saw the birth of a new form of sexual politics. From NBC’s New York studios came the first black male cross-dressing character on television. A black American male named Flip Wilson played the role of Geraldine, in the first successful black hosted variety show in television history, *The Flip Wilson Show Tonight.* Watching him was painful, for my family and friends directed derogatory and heterosexist remarks at him during the show. Some of my friends said that they wished that they could pull him out of the television screen and “put ah good lash and beating upon him and straighten him out.” My parents would caution us about the program and insist that we not watch it unattended, or would recommend that we do school work while it was on. People would often express disbelief that a buller man was on television and wonder why he would embarrass black people by acting so stupid. This show came at a time when the North American feminist movement was beginning the struggles for women’s liberation, and at a time when women within the black consciousness movement were questioning their roles and places in society. Forced upon us through American cultural hegemony, popular culture became a contested site upon which the Trinidadian, through comedy and music, entered (in a more public or open fashion) the gender, sex, and sexuality debate; hence, the resistance at the time was constructed around social change. Wylie Sypher reminds us, “The ambivalence of comedy reappears in its social meaning, for comedy is both hatred and revel, rebellion and defense, attack and escape. It is revolutionary and conservative. Socially, it is both sympathy and persecution.”

Redd Foxx’s big-screen movie *Norman . . . Is That You?* (1976) was a little more controversial, playing with sex, sexuality, and the heterosexual sexual revolution. *Norman . . . Is That You?* is based on a Broadway play by Ron Clark and Sam Bobrick, about a young man who is black and gay. Redd Foxx’s character, after not seeing his son Norman for over ten years, pays Norman a surprise visit. Norman at first hides his effeminate white boyfriend, Garson, who tries to persuade him to tell his father that they are lovers. In Norman’s absence, Garson returns to pick up his clothes and opens the closet door by packing a dress in his suitcase in front of Norman’s father. The father attempts to convince his son that he is not gay by asking him to walk and to say “Mississippi,” and by reminding him that he never dropped the ball when they used to play football. He even tells Norman to go to a physician for help, which is not an uncommon suggestion from many parents who see homosexuality as a sickness.

For the first time a black American movie televised in the Caribbean depicted a same-sex relationship involving a black man, just when most people in the Caribbean were denying the existence of such a thing. For many Trinidadians, however, the decadence of whiteness explained Norman’s status as a buller. According to their heterosexist logic, whites infiltrate day-care centers, prisons, and schools, turning black males into sissies, bullers, and weak traitors to their race.

Many calypsonians, mostly men, sang about Norman that year, and the next. It is common for calypsonians engaging in musical competitions to make fun of buller men, village women, or public figures. Such music often appropriated sexist, homophobic, and misogynist themes in a society where hyper-masculinity is the key to manhood. Calypsonian Dennis Williams (a.k.a. Merchant) captured Trinidadian pop culture with his 1977 hit “Norman Is That You.” His calypso launched a debate—in communities, on television and radio, in the broadsheet and tabloid newspapers—about same-sex relationships. Many other calypsonians, especially those without record labels in their calypso tent, continued during Carnival seasons to sing and make fun of bullers in the most hostile and violent way.

That year people started to identify some mas bands as buller-men mas bands and some as heterosexual. Hecklers on the street or within my family would call a male who walked, spoke, or acted in a feminine manner “Norman.” The graphic, violent, and homophobic calypso “Pepper in the Vaseline” — a threatening reference to sexual practices — reflected prevailing attitudes towards bullers and batty bwoys. Another calypsonian’s song said, “Come out at your own risk.”

Then came calypsonian Edwin (a.k.a. Crazy) Ayong’s popular song titled “Take ah Man,” a controversial song that became a private anthem and a way of reclaiming power for many gays in Trinidad, who enjoyed the double meaning of the song. His most empowering words for some bullers were “If yuh cyar get ah wooman, take ah man.” Under the cover of discotheques and private parties in Trinidad, this song was loved and played often by bullers. The same experience was played out among Caribbean bullers and lesbians living in Canada.

As a buller, I found the calypso and the debates about the mas bands illuminating. I started to learn about places and people in Trinidad that had a
culture of bullers. I discovered how they created their space for survival, their geographies and sites of pleasure. Although I did not attend their events or visit their homes, at least I knew that I was not alone and that there was an emerging culture of bullers that I would be able to embrace someday. If you were an out buller man, everybody called you Norman, buller, anti-man, pantry man, shirley, or "she," and you dared not respond because physical and verbal violence would follow, with no police protection. Buller men both challenged and confirmed heterosexist norms, but could not offer a transformative challenge.

The movie Norman . . . Is That You? became a great concern for pastors. They reminded the congregation about the evils of same-sex relationships. There was a moral panic about men becoming bullers. Our parents warned us not to become a buller like Norman. I saw two options for myself: be silent or join in the slander of bullers. Most of the time I joined in the slander, because it helped me to erase guilt and provided privileged membership in the hyper-masculinized heterosexist club.

There was also a paucity of reading material on same-sex issues. The Bible, traditional psychology and psychiatry, and the local newspaper condemned bullers. Trinidadian weekly tabloids such as the Bomb and the Punch, and the daily newspaper, the Express, slandered men and women suspected of being in same-sex relationships. They would often publish a picture and write about someone in the most destructive and belittling way, sometimes urging that person to leave the community or even the country. The Bomb and the Punch reported the first known buller-man wedding in Trinidad, in 1982; the reports exposed the names of the two grooms and their families, which forced both men to quit their jobs and move to Canada, where they now live. Through this irresponsible reporting I learned a great deal about other bullers and zamis, and about the violence to expect if I decided to come out. I often hid from family members when I read these stories.

In reading rooms or libraries the subject of homosexuality appeared only in the sections about law, medicine, psychiatry, psychology, or sociology, under the topics of deviance, immorality, or mental illness. After discovering this pathology I ceased my search for reading material on same-sex issues. Eventually I turned to texts by black writers such as Stokely Carmichael, Eldridge Cleaver, Angela Davis, Bobby Seal, and Eric Williams, hoping to find a paragraph or two on black same-sex relationships. Instead, most of the ideologues of the 1960s and 1970s had negative views or had ignored the subject; their writings remained focused on the historical and often-virulent presence of racism. For brevity's sake, I will not develop further an analysis of the Black Power movement and its impact on homosexuality in Trinidad. However, black literary works, consciousness, ideology, and nationalism, and the discourses of black activists, have sought to present the race in the "best light," often depicting blacks with qualities, values, and beliefs admired by white, patriarchal right-wing society. Many black writers have felt great anxiety about presenting sexuality, same-sex desire, or feminist politics. In the words of bell hooks, black nationalism has been constructed as a "dick thing."51 Henry Louis Gates Jr. has written, "That is not to say that the ideology of Black Nationalism in this country has any unique claim on homophobia. But it is an almost obsessive motif that runs through the major authors of the Black aesthetic and the Black Power movements. In short, national identity became sexualized in the sixties and seventies in such a way as to engender a curious subterranean connection between homophobia and nationalism."52 Nonetheless, these texts continue to help shape black culture, communal solidarity, and identity.

**GIRLFRIENDS AND EXPLORING THE EROTIC**

Social pressures and family and community values made me feel that I had to have a few "girlfriends" with whom I was intimate. This pressure was a combination of two forces: the normative prescriptions of family and community, and my own internalized fear and guilt about an attraction to men. Thus I sought out intimate relationships with women. These relationships, I hoped, would cure my same-sex erotic feelings and attach me to the rules of a heterosexist cultural masculinity within family and community. Being intimate with girlfriends, or having multiple sexual partners, was another way to exhibit my toughness and masculinity and to erase public suspicion about my being a buller man. However, my relationships with women did not last long, because I was never fully comfortable or satisfied with the resulting exploration of my erotic, emotional, and physical feelings.

I use the term "exploration of the erotic" in a broad sense, as Lorde has defined it: "Our deepest knowledge, a power that, unlike other spheres of power, we all have access to and that can lessen the threat of our individual difference."53 A form of Caribbean state-ordained nationalism and religious hegemonization has discouraged such exploration by creating a "dualism central to [Caribbean/ Western thought, finding parallels in distinctions between good/evil, man/woman and a range of other binarisms, which have shaped the glass through which institutionalized Christianity (religion) has viewed the world: either/or; good/bad; us/them; soul/body."54
It is within these religious binarisms that I judged my same-sex attraction, often leading to a sense of shame, unhappiness, sinfulness, and dirtiness, while being torn apart inside.

The gender system (or prison), as Steven Seidman argues in “Identity Politics in a Postmodern Gay Culture,” is said to posit heterosexuality as a primary sign of gender normality. A true man loves women; a true woman loves men. Sex roles are a first, and central, distinction made by society. 355 The gender performance, as constructed for black manhood, has been both heterosexist and sexist. Marcel Saghir and Eli Robins state that a “majority of gay people irrespective of race [over half of gay men and more than three-quarters of gay women] have had heterosexual experiences.”356 This practice is common to many people in the Caribbean, although not unique to that region. Michael Warner calls this heteronormativity “the domination of norms that supports, reinforces and reproduces heterosexual social forms.” For Warner, a reproductivist conception of the social institutions of heterosexual reproduction, institutions of socialization, and heterosexual hegemony supplements this heteronormativity. 57

As a social construct heteronormativity permeates what Gayle Rubin has called the “sex gender system,” which codes everything from social class to race into a particular set of sexualized and gendered identities that constitute and reproduce the social system in which we live. 58 Clearly most bullers have accepted heterosexuality as the norm and have viewed homosexuality as abnormal, deviant, or different. Perhaps this explains why for bullers, according to Saghir and Robins, “the most frequently encountered emotional reaction following heterosexual involvement is that of indifference. It is not an aversion, nor a conscious fear of heterosexuality, for most homosexual women and men find no emotional aversion and feel no trepidation in becoming involved heterosexually. The determining factor in the subsequent avoidance of heterosexual involvement is the lack of emotional gratification and true physical arousal with opposite sex partners.” 59

These norms invade same-sex practices by feminizing some black men who, when engaging in same-sex practices, act hyper-masculine in order to secure their heterosexuality and masculinity. Black nationalists and black individuals embracing stereotypical constructions of masculinity and black self-expression have sought to regulate and control the masculinity and sexual practices of bullers, and thereby to discourage all same-sex sexuality. As bullers, if we attempt to deconstruct and reconstruct the traditional black, nationalist, male, heterosexual gender “norms,” we encounter great hostility and in some cases violence. Nevertheless, I resist the myopic definitions of “black masculinity” and “manhood.” I do so to free myself from the black gender prison imposed on us by white racist constructions of black masculinity, which go hand-in-hand with the black ideologue’s construction of family and black masculinity.

**WITHOUT CONCLUSION**

And my brother’s back at home, with his Beatles and his Stones. / We never got it off on that revolution, / What a drag. / Too many snags.  
— DAVID BOWIE, “All the Young Dudes” (performed by Mott the Hoople)

For me this debate is ongoing, hence “without conclusion” correctly captures the stage of our struggle for same-sex recognition and equal protection in law. I also want to say that although I have focused on my struggles as a Trinidadian, these struggles are common in other Caribbean islands. For example, a homophobia-fueled protest was staged in Jamaica in anticipation of a concert by the Village People in March of 2002 (their appearance was cancelled). In addition, when the Jamaican government suggested condom distribution in the prisons to the guards and inmates alike, the insulted (and, one might add, homophobic) guards walked off the job, setting off a series of riots in which prisoners killed sixteen of their fellow inmates believed to be batty bwoys or bullers. In the Bahamas, a cruise ship was turned back by the Bahamian government when they found out that the cruise was filled with gay men from the United States. These are just a few examples of recent stories and issues that have plagued other Caribbean islands.

It would indeed be an understatement, from both a historical and a contemporary perspective, to say that Caribbean culture has been unkind to men and women who engage in same-sex practices and relationships. This is obvious in the policing of bodily practices, institutionalizing of hegemonic laws, acts of violence, compulsory heterosexist practices, and other borders that set bullers apart from heterosexuals through the denial of our human rights and dignity.

When Louis Althusser wrote that ideology represents “not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live” (and which govern their existence), he was also describing exactly, to my mind, the functioning of sexuality and sexual orientation. 60 An engendered space is negotiated within Althusserian Marxism, one of the most humanistic branches of Marxist thought. Here “negotiation” describes the process of
including a formerly excluded, taboo, marginalized, or policed concern. So if, for example, many in Trinidad and the Caribbean do not see the struggle for same-sex recognition and human rights protection to be an important area for consideration, it is our responsibility as those who carry the burden and have a stake in social-justice work to always be vigilant, and to speak to issues of human rights concerns for men and women who have and are in same-sex relationships. The failure to do so leaves me to ask myself: Where has the passion for Left politics disappeared to, if no one is bringing this struggle to the forefront in Trinidad? Such passion does exist, as has been seen with Black Power movements in Trinidad. For example, who ever would have thought that we would have a Black Power revolution in the 1960s and another attempt to overthrow the ruling government on July 27, 1990, shutting down the country for almost two weeks? Change is inevitable, and a sexual revolution is boiling and will boil over soon, as it has started to boil over slowly in Jamaica. It is hoped that other Caribbean islands, like Jamaica, will gain the confidence and garner the support for social activism on the issue of same-sex protection.

I have always been driven by the desire to serve my community and my people, and I believe that those who live in that community understand its problems. Some of those intelligent, sensitive, understanding, and resourceful people are women, buller men, and batty bwoys. I am frequently told that I can support and be active in heterosexist black organizations, attend sit-ins and street demonstrations, fight against police injustice, and work with homeless youths and their families. But I must not "flaunt" my sickness, because it runs counter to black unity, black family values, and black collective consciousness.

Positing a split between being a good black person and Trinidadian and being gay can be dangerous, because of the inherent dangers of denying differences within our black communities. As Cornel West concludes in Marlon Riggs's documentary Black Is . . . Black Ain't, "We have got to conceive of new forms of community. We each have multiple identities, and we're moving in and out of various communities at the same time. There is no one grand Black community or Black male identity." Stuart Hall, too, has called for a new kind of politics, based on the diversity of the black experience and recognizing black people's historically defined black experiences. Hall's plea for "a new kind of cultural politics" insists that we "recognize the other kinds of difference (those of gender, sexuality, race and class, for example) that place, position, and locate Black people.

In summary, the lack of support in the Caribbean context for people engaging in same-sex practices, the violent attacks on people who seek same-sex agency or identities, and family, community, and religious oppression have made it impossible for people to engage in same-sex practices and be open about it. The Caribbean context has policed desire along lines of good and bad, clean and unclean, and has imposed stereotypical roles and expectations on men and women, hence constructing at all times a heterosexual identity. We did not have a Stonewall riot in the Caribbean to give rise to a black same-sex politics that would support bullers politically, economically, and socially. However, I do foresee change in the Caribbean, due to North American hegemony, in this millennium. Just as many things have changed, we will see a change in the policing of peoples' attitudes in the Caribbean, in particular when women join the struggle for sexual liberation, and I do believe that the collective will is there and that the time is soon. State and cultural power will shift in their policing of differences. As the Chicana poet Gloria Anzaldúa writes:

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A borderland is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. Les atravessadas live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal."

And these borders we will cross!

NOTES

1 "Buller man" is an indigenous derogatory epither that I grew up with in Trinidad and Tobago, used to refer to men who have sex with other men. It is also widely used in some English-speaking Caribbean islands such as St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and Barbados. For more information on the term, see Richard Allsopp, The Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage (London: Oxford University Press, 1996), 120. Future references to Trinidad and Tobago will be abbreviated to "Trinidad."


3 "Heterosexist" refers to characteristics of an ideological system that denies, "en-
grates, and stigmatizes non-heterosexual forms of behavior, identity, relationship, or community. The end result of this dynamic is oppression, intolerance, and daily acts of violence.


While I am attempting to use or restore indigenous sexual terms or knowledge specific to Trinidad, I am also at the same time echoing Jamaican anthropologist Charles V. Carnegie, who argues that “as we seek to restore indigenous terms and knowledge systems, we must simultaneously seek to sharpen an ‘indigenous’ criticism.” Charles V. Carnegie, “On Liminal Subjectivity” (paper presented at the National Symposium on Indigenous Knowledge and Contemporary Social Issues, Tampa, Florida, March 4, 1994).

Hence the use of the term “buller man” is not without criticism due to North American hegemony in Trinidad, but it is important to employ this concept because this move signifies a break with the white hegemony of lesbian and gay politics and the recent development of queer theory. Finally, importantly, when I was in Trinidad it was the term I knew.

Lorde uses the term limnology to describe her work Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1983).

Lorde, reaching back into the past, remembering her Grenadian mother’s history in a small island called Carriacou, tells us that zami is “a Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers.” The word comes from the French patois for les amies, lesbians. More on this, see Lorde, Zami, 255.

Ibid.

Annie McClintock, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context (New York: Routledge, 1995), 315.

Gumbo is a traditional Southern black American dish made from a combination of seafood, poultry, meats, sausages, and other ingredients. For Riggs, “gumbo” as metaphor expresses who we are as black people: “Some are light skin, dark skin, Christian, atheist, men, women, women who love men, men who love women, a little bit of everything that makes whole Black communities.” Riggs, Black Is ... Black Ain’t (San Francisco: Independent Television Service/Columbia Newsreel, 1995).

Sexual orientation, according to Bonnie Simpson, “refers to an individual’s predisposition to experience physical and affectional attraction to members of the same, the other or both sexes. Established early in life, it is the result of a little-understood but complex set of genetic, biological, and environmental factors” (Simpson, Opening Doors: Making Substance Abuse and Other Services More Accessible to Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth [Toronto: Central Toronto Youth Services, 1994], 5).


Lorde, A Screen of Light: Essays on Sexuality and Difference (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1992), 47.


The metaphorical term “closet” is used to talk about persons who are aware of their same-sex attractions and identities, but choose not to declare them to the public, family, friends, community, or coworkers. “To be in the closet” results in others assuming that you are “heterosexual,” or repressed and living in social isolation.


Ibid., 16–17.


Batty boy/bwoy/man is a derogatory term indigenous to Jamaica, but it is also commonly used in Antigua and Guyana to describe sexual practices between men who have sex with other men (Allsopp, The Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage, 84). I have not been able to discover its etymology as I have been able to do with buller man, but an adequate history of the genesis of the term might help to enable its use in contemporary Caribbean theories in the area of study on sex and sexuality.


Alexander, “Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen,” 13. While the nuclear, conjugal family may be the “ideal,” it is not the norm for most in the Caribbean. But some Caribbean parents still push for that ideal to protect class images and identity.


In Trinidad, the Sexual Offences Act or Sodomory Laws of 1866, sections 13 and 16, and the Immigration Act of 1986, article 8 (18/1), prohibit and regulate
sexual activity between consenting adults and declare homosexuality illegal in the country.

34 Butler, Gender Trouble, 122.
36 The savanna is the grounds used for sporting, political, and cultural activities.
40 Ibid., 72–73.
42 Raphael, The Men from the Boys: Rites of Passage in Male America (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 128.
43 Ibid., 3.
44 Blaxploitation films involved black actors being trapped in the racist, stereotypical “other” position, while white actors were cast as heroes and smart people. Blacks were always thieves, shiftless, lazy, and unintelligent; often the first to be killed, they sometimes acted in stereotypically humorous ways to gain acceptance.
47 Geralding was created, according to Flip Wilson, because while he was working, white men would often come up to him and insult the age-old racist and sexist stereotype, asking, “Hey, can you get me a girl?” He took offense to this and wanted to erase white society’s racist stereotype by creating a proud, independent and dignified black woman, so he created Geralding. See Mel Watkins, “The Whole Cookie,” AFP Reporter 2, no. 3 (1979): n.p., http://www.aliciapatterson.org/AFP/1979/AFP0301.html.
50 I had many male friends who had sex with other men and also played in man bands, such as Peter Minshall, Wayne Berkley, Stephen Lee Young, and Harold Saldenah. They informed me that these were the bands to play with, or that I should attend these bands’ launching parties in order to meet other bullers. They also stressed that this was an ideal opportunity to meet tourists who were bullers and who came to play mas—in particular Peter Minshall’s band. Minshall’s band.