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## The Trope of Flattening and the Complexities of Difference: An Account of Trinidad Carnival

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This article introduces the concept of flattening as an alternative way to map and analyze power structures and cultural meaning in Trinidad Carnival. Borrowed from modernist art, “flattening” refers to the approximation and juxtapositioning of elements that, usually distanced, are now brought together, thus tampering creatively with usual frames of reference. In the words of Clement Greenberg,

...the picture plane itself grows shallower and shallower, flattening out and pressing together the fictive planes of depth until they meet as one upon the real and material plane, which is the actual surface of the canvas; where they lie side by side or interlocked or transparently imposed upon each other. Where the painter still tries to indicate real objects their shapes flatten and spread in the dense, two-dimensional atmosphere. (Greenberg 35)

The concept of flattening emphasizes the elasticity and fluidity that often confounds notions of difference; it captures experiences of fragmentation and flux. As a result, the concept is well suited when speaking about Carnival, where cultural frames are constantly blurred, stretched, erased or redrawn; where masquerade signals a distortion of social and cultural distinctions; and where traditional hierarchies of meaning and value collapse, temporarily flattening divisions between race, class and gender, paralleling the flattening technique of visual artists that merge surface and sign. Carnival, we might say, is avowedly painterly.

The concept of flattening allows Carnival to be read as a performative strategy for the deflation and hollowing out of difference, and emphasizes the elasticity and fluidity of Carnival positions. The concept also offers an effective way to speak about the multiple layers of meaning in Carnival and to interpret their significances within Trinidad society. It stresses Carnival’s overlapping and intersecting tensions, which, with the tool of flattening, become individually readable. In the end, it exposes Carnival as a privileged site of hybridity and ambivalence, of fluidity and changeability, of appropriation and incompleteness, which, again through a flattening of difference, makes allowances for an Other.

Three case studies showcasing Trinidad Carnival are introduced in this article to demonstrate the mechanics of flattening, each case study illustrating a different function. “Rituals are carried by a community that tries to mark the boundary between inside and outside and to keep outsiders at a distance,” Bernard Giesen argues (345); yet Carnival nonetheless manages to effectively transform outsiders into captivated audiences—thereby providing yet a further example of flattening. The authors, themselves cultural outsiders, have chosen case studies that show how Carnival has caught the attention of other cultural outsiders, and they use this article to interpret these outside perspectives through their own, and to integrate these perspectives into a larger narrative on

flattening. As a result, we examine the concept through local masquerading perceived from audience standpoints as well as from non-Trinidad artist perspectives. These case studies demonstrate enactments of flattening, while highlighting the outside perspective; revealing a leveling process that blurs cultural and societal boundaries and flattens complexities and contradictions in ways that invert hierarchies; or, to borrow from Pierre Bourdieu, make them more “changeable and porous” (Rojek 88).

#### FLATTENING AS METHODOLOGY

The concept of flatness has increasingly become used in recent years as a significant parameter in defining our relationship to the external world, used to speak about media and contexts outside the visual arts. This includes contemporary performance practice (Tadashi 59), memory and trauma (Berlant 5), literature, photography, painting (Bal 3), and film and theatre (Ackerman and Beckett 401). Bal, for example, has outlined that flat imagery in the literary realm “integrates multiple stances, multiple needs of not only an affective order, but also a perceptual, epistemological, and poetic order” (Bal 2). Likewise Ackerman discusses the productiveness of flatness in figurative and literal terms of the image as a form of “radical iconoclasm” or “unmaking” of the image by “exposing the vulnerability of the pictorial surface, destroying the support upon which the image appears” (Ackerman and Beckett 401). Joselit, too, refers in his discussion of visual art to the flattened silhouette as “both there and not there”, which emphasizes the formal oscillation between binary systems including positive/negative, body/shadow, black /white (Joselit 30). Flattening has also been discussed through a variety of themes, including flatness as deliberate limitedness (Joselit 30), flattening as erasure or concealment of surfaces (Harrison 302), flatness as “quietly rebellious” (Canning and Swinbourne 84) and flattening as “inharmonious resolutions” (Bal 3). This article adds to the dialogue by introducing flattening and its relationship to Carnival.

Analyzing Carnival through the notion of flattening enables an effective way to discuss the event with new perspective and contrast (not unlike that in painting). The term flattening is particularly useful when discussing representations of what Bakhtin has termed the *carnavalesque* body, where “stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, parts through which the world enters the body or merges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world” (Bakhtin 26).<sup>1</sup> The outside and the inside of the body disconnect as the world and body

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<sup>1</sup> The understanding of carnival tends often to focus on tropes such as the carnivalesque body without considering the individual reveler itself (Aching 418). This article proposes to review the binary system and see carnival characters such as the bat as opportunity to deflate

invert; identities shift and boundaries deflate as the *carnavalesque* body assumes the appearance and mannerisms of another. A closer look at those places where world/body, inside/outside, Self/Other overlap reveals masking to be itself a form of flattening, a process of bringing together difference in ways that not only challenge the social order, but also turn it upside down; making it key to understanding Carnival. Flattening identifies the *carnavalesque* body as being grounded in a time of liminality, pressed into “moments of discontinuity in the social fabric...moments of ‘in-betweenness’, of a loss of social coordinates” (Shields 83). With *carnavalesque* representing “another life free from conventional rules and restrictions,” the process of flattening is displayed as “quietly rebellious” (Shields 84), where “all that is marginalised and excluded—the mad, the scandalous, and the aleatory—takes over the centre in a liberating explosion of otherness” (Stam 86).

Central to Carnival is a challenge to authority, in which transgression stands as a crucial element. Taboos may be broken and social norms defied, yet, transgressions are bounded, comprising “a code of conduct that is every bit as ordered as people’s normal lives” (Gilchrist and Ravescroft 40). To that end, flattening again serves as an effective mode of analysis. It enables a way to speak about Carnival’s socially-sanctioned and unsanctioned forms of transgression, which, if pressed together, may open up an alternative logic, creating new networks of meaning and new associations of power (Bonnstetter 35). From this perspective, flattening provides a tool for analyzing transgressive forces and for thinking through Carnival strategies of transgression. It enables a window through which to view how transgression is imagined in Carnival, to analyze how those imaginings work, and to pull apart the possible counter-meanings that emerge as a result.

The concept of *dialogism* is fundamental here. “Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence,” writes Bakhtin; if dialogism ends, “everything ends” (Bakhtin 252). When the process of flattening brings “two voices” together there is the potential for new voices to develop, although each voice “retains its own unity and open totality they are mutually enriched” through the process (Bakhtin 56). From this perspective, dialogism generates difference, promoting “renewal and enrichment” (Bakhtin 271). Captured in the methodological application of flattening, *dialogism* emerges in this article as a worthwhile tool for discussing our case studies. Flatness also enables a way to speak about the imagined “exotic” Trinidad that has taken root in the contemporary imagination of the West. Wainwright has suggested Trinidad to be a hybrid compound, “in which tourism and the tropics collide at the locus of vision and the painted, printed and photographic image” (Wainwright 135). The promotion of a *tropical picture perfect* Trinidad involves the necessary pressing together of differences. “In such works not only optical but psychological depth undergoes deflation, resulting in a

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categories such as self/other (see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Multitude: War and democracy in the age of empire* (2005) for a further discussion).

visuality in which identity manifests itself as a culturally conditioned play of stereotype” (Joselit 20). This perspective reveals Trinidad Carnival and its visual economy in broader terms, enabling us to reconsider both the transgressiveness and renewal elements of flattening.

Carnival images and sounds afford an environment where direct participation is both expected and required. It is an event that is meant neither to be exclusively observed by audiences, nor enacted by performers. As a result, a flexible array of possibilities is afforded the Carnival audience—possibilities that they themselves can manipulate to fit their own needs. From this perspective, flatness can be said to be performed in the spectator’s consciousness, with Carnival audiences benefiting from its transgressiveness and renewal elements while also seeking to settle—or press together—its differences. To borrow from Debord,

[T]he spectator’s consciousness, imprisoned in a flattened universe, bound by the screen of the spectacle behind which his life has been deported, knows only the fictional speakers who unilaterally surround him with their commodities and the politics of their commodities. (Debord 218)

Within these discussions, flattening emerges as transgressive, hence suggesting a particular (materially specific) process of radicalization. One of the ways in which this flattening takes claim to being a kind of radicalization is in its tendency to juxtapose different temporalities. By this we mean the tendency to fold two or more different temporalities together (for example the temporality of public discourse versus that of unofficial vernacular culture), thereby rendering the surface (the flattened material, the flattened space) radically indeterminate in terms of temporal structure.

#### TRINIDAD AND COLONIAL HISTORIES OF FLATTENING

Trinidad represents the product of complex hierarchal conflicts emerging from a colonial encounter between culturally distinct and geographically separated societies. Through this encounter, one society came to control another, politically, culturally and economically, justifying its control by complaining about the inferiority of the other, and instituting laws to mandate such ideology. A hierarchical system of difference emerged as a result, with the dominating society deemed superior as against that what was considered lesser.

Again the notion of flattening can be used to discuss this history. It emphasizes the effect processes of Othering has had (and continues to have) on once-colonized nations; it situates colonialism as emerging in opposition to evolving binaries, from colonizer vs. colonized to Self vs. Other; and it enables an analysis that exposes the different ways in which power has been

and can be both assumed and challenged. Flattening can be examined first as an end-product of the colonial experience, used by the dominating society to secure its beliefs and values. Yet it can also be viewed as a strategy of the colonized, where it served as a tactic for gaining some social acceptance and accruing a share of power. In other words, by inverting the process of flattening to suit their own needs, Trinidad's oppressed transformed "flattening" into a tool that they could employ to effectively resist and deconstruct repressive binary frames of colonialism. This section of the article thus introduces Trinidad through histories of flattening. Its intent is to contribute to an understanding of how Carnival, in supporting processes of flattening, was transformed into a space "that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhaba 4).

Trinidad was first colonized by Spain in 1498. Only a small number of Spanish remained on the island, however, making Trinidad one of Spain's most under-populated territories. In an effort to encourage an increase in migration, the Spanish government in 1783 instituted reforms that promised would-be newcomers plots of land on Trinidad. These government initiatives attracted primarily French creole planters who, fearing that the slave uprisings occurring in Haiti would spread across the French West Indies, relocated to Trinidad, arriving with their own enslaved Africans. Other Europeans eventually followed, including those from Switzerland, Italy and Germany. Together, they helped establish on Trinidad a rich European cultural diversity, launching multiple hierarchies of difference and generating a diversity of views on the small island.

In the beginning, slave labor needs were met by the Africans who were brought to the island by the French. This quickly changed, however, when the British assumed occupation in 1797, establishing on it a strong sugar economy that demanded a marked increase in slave labor. Under British control, the African population quickly doubled, which, accounting for two-thirds of Trinidad's population, established a diverse Black population that included both the Caribbean- and the African-born. A divided elite society quickly developed, splitting between an English/Anglican culture on the one hand and a French/Catholic, creole culture on the other. The African/Black community also divided, with Creole Blacks versed in French creole culture at one end, and newly-arriving slaves committed to maintaining African traditions on the other. This pull between communities was critical to the early shaping of Trinidad Carnival as a ritual of status reversal. Emancipation in 1834 brought on a labor shortage, which, in turn, led to the importation of indentured labor from other English colonies—primarily the regions presently known as India and Pakistan. Asian workers replaced former African slaves to work the plantations, creating an indentureship that remained in place until 1917. The Asian presence further transformed Trinidad into a culturally and ethnically diverse island, helping to create a historical, cultural and social narrative that became celebrated in Trinidad's Carnival.

In colonial Trinidad, the different ethnic and cultural communities held their own independent celebrations on the island. Trinidad's French organized "elaborate masquerade balls, house-to-house visiting and street promenading in carriages or foot" that attempted to mirror Europe's own carnival celebrations held before Lent (Lee 419). In their masquerading, they acted out themes that adhered to carnivalesque expectations with a strong Caribbean sensibility: men masqueraded as African slaves, usually parodying them as "childish, sensuous, hedonistic," while the women "dressed themselves as colored women, pretending that their husbands desired them as they did their mulatto mistresses" (Johnson xiii). Their masquerades deliberately represented Trinidad's crossroad of race, gender and class, maintaining and extending what Hall has called the "spectacle of the other" (Hall 223). Blacks in Trinidad had relied on activities such as dancing, drumming, singing and masking derived largely from West African cultural events, concentrating their celebratory occasions at first around the New Year and, after the abolishment of slavery, on August 1—the exact date of emancipation (Warner-Lewis 180). In the eyes of Trinidad's European elite, the celebrations of Blacks were "noisy and disorderly" (Pearse 20), provoking behavior deemed "savage, vulgar, indecent, demonic, dangerous, rebellious...facilitate[ing] surveillance and governmentability [that] the modern-day carnival still grapples with in the negotiation of cultural identities" (Nurse 670).

The Black Trinidadian celebrations promoted unity and strength among its celebrants. In an effort to regain control, governing Whites responded in the 1890s by promoting a single consolidated celebration, involving both Whites and Blacks, that would occur directly before Lent, thereby coinciding with their already-organized Carnival festivities. It was an example of Trinidadian Whites purposefully flattening boundaries of difference, albeit temporarily, as a method of imperial policy. The accompanying rituals of stick fighting and cane burning, which dominated the August 1 celebrations, were banned in these White Trinidad-controlled celebrations. Seeds of conflicts and antagonism within the Black community stirred, fuelling issues of cultural ownership and decision-making that continue to divide Carnival participation. Errol Hill writes,

The social classes still kept apart. In the main, one group of revellers playing traditional masquerades would tramp through the streets chanting choruses to the tambu-bambu and bottle and spoon orchestras [predecessors to the steel pan]. Another group of revellers led by their chantwell [calypso singer], and dancing to calypso refrains accompanied by string-band music, were drawn from the coloured middle-class. Yet a third group parading in carriages or on decorated trucks and dressed as pirates, gypsies or harem damsels were from the high coloured and white merchant and property classes. (Hill 27)

From this perspective “flattening” can be said to have evolved on Trinidad in part as a response to racial, ethnic, gendered and class divisions. Yet, it has been sustained in turn by individuals consciously foregrounding race, ethnicity, gender and class. An examination of Trinidad’s multiple histories of flattening shows them to be part of a process where boundaries could be redrawn and new identities enforced. Flattening disrupted Trinidad’s hegemony of social and historical categories in ways that has superseded binary modes of thinking, “blurring hierarchical imposition of order” precisely because they enabled the possibility of new or other realities (Hall 8).

### THREE CASE STUDIES

In the remainder of the article we introduce three case studies as examples of different modes of flattening. Drawing from masquerade and painting, these case studies address the appropriateness of visual methods in Carnival research and of ethnography in visual art analysis. We engage with issues of representation that critique dominating canons and definitions, questioning the structures that have motivated the different representations of Carnival and the divergent histories of flattening. Representation is a complex term. It implies that images do not necessarily reflect their sources as much as they refashion them according to pictorial codes. Acts of representation are often connected intimately to social processes, which may determine the representation but are consequentially also influenced and altered by it. Representations articulate not only visual codes and conventions, but also inform the social practices and forces that bring them about.

Carnival creates a world where acts of representation flourish: objects are liberated, however temporarily, from perceived definition—a piece of cloth transforms a boy into a dragon; a cardboard hat turns a man into a king. Representation turns Carnival into a very visual event, as captured in the case studies. Their analysis outlines engagement with Trinidad’s histories of flattening, and shows the influence of Carnival imagery on the participants while also introducing the Carnival imagery from the viewpoint of the participants and observers as well.

#### CASE STUDY 1: PETER DOIG, FLATTENING AND SYMBOLIC OPPOSITIONS

Brueghel’s *Fight between Carnival and Lent* (1559) offers a visual account of the fraudulent relationship between fleshy obese and boney meager figures (Riggio 15). It is also a reminder of the threshold Carnival is seeking to mark between excess/license and lent, reflected visually in a deflating and flattening of the characters. The work of British painter and Trinidad resident Peter Doig actively plays with these aspects. On a formal and semantic level, his

work deals in particular with the synthesis of fantasy and reality, where fictional and real accounts are in an unstable relation (Shiff 22). Moreover, since his move to Trinidad, his work fosters a “conversation” between Caribbean cultures and their critical “outside,” drawing frequent reference to Caribbean cultures in his work (Wainright 32).

*Man dressed as Bat* (2007) depicts the shape of a bat in the center of the painting on the edge of the sea. The unprimed canvas is covered with stained, washed-out colors representing the marine surrounding, while the faded figure of the bat seems to be left unstained. The faded silhouette of the figure of the bat is reminiscent of Rorschach inkblot and allows the view onto the unstained canvas. The faded, translucent shades foreground not only the process of flattening, but also the transgressive qualities of Doig’s work. *Man dressed as Bat* can be seen as a typical instance, which locates the Trinidad Carnival character of the bat in the center of the painting. The paradoxical covering/revealing aspect in Doig’s work offers a further instance of overlap of different spheres through the idea of flattening, where “fragile interpretive limits” question clear categorizations of “neither-here-nor-there, where time has been not so much slowed down as arrested” (Higgs 2003).



Figure 1. Trinidad Carnival Costume (designer unknown).

In the following analysis of *Man dressed as Bat* we will identify the strategies for the flattening of hierarchies Doig employs in his painting of the Trinidadian Carnival character. The *Bat* as a Trinidadian carnival character such as Robber, Dragon, Devils or Pierrot amongst others, originated from the

more traditional form of Trinidad Carnival, known as *ole mas*. However, allusions to the dark past of slaves murdered and hung on trees are entirely removed from today's symbol of the bat (Ismond 137). Nevertheless, as Carnival designer Peter Minshall argues, the bat has become a unique symbol of Trinidadian identity, reflected in a constant artistic reimagination.<sup>2</sup> The Carnival costume of the bat, with its extension of the human body and the hybrid character of the bat, reflects the potential of transgressions emblematic of the character of the bat. Beyond the ability to transfer itself as character during Carnival from bat to the king of Carnival, the bat as animal reflects the powerful deflation of the categories mammal/bird. Associations with the vampire figure allow a further questioning of its hybrid make-up being half man/animal and thereby intensifying the *Carnavalesque* characteristic even more. The flattening of categories seen here in the image of the bat could be described as a kind of *Carnavalesque* transgressiveness, which exceeds the locally confined structure of propriety, decency and stability, previously perceived as a particularly monstrous threat to moral values (Hardt and Negri 192). Vampires, or bats, can be seen as symptoms of this fear of transgression, as an excessive breaching of the body and as undermining the heteronormative principles of biological production. In broader social terms, the *Carnavalesque* stands for the breach of the self-contained isolated self and, as has been argued, for renovation: "The *Carnavalesque* thus sets in motion an enormous capacity for innovation - innovation that can transform itself" (Hardt and Negri 210). Doig's *Man dressed as Bat* reflects not only the ability to transform itself, but it also enacts the idea of a particularly polymorphous element as blank/filled, present/absent.

This aspect of a composite figure and liminal character reflects a further characteristic of Doig's work, the mediation of opposite elements. The painting is based on a small sculpture of the Carnival character that stands for a "metamorphosing from human to bat to butterfly to ectoplasmic specter—a perfect allegory for Doig's art of transformation, in which beauty is always a possibility but never a sure thing" (Turvey 2009). The representation of the character itself does not allow any gender categorization of the depicted figure, despite the fact that its title insinuates maleness. The painting evokes associations with romantic, heroic settings of paintings such as Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* (1808–10). Doig, however, in the flattened overlap and deflation of semantic categories, suggests rather a merging of differences.

Doig's work in general can be seen to examine transgressive artistic practices, despite the strong dualism in his compositions. Depicting clear limits and boundaries in his paintings (see e.g. *Pelican* (2004), *Figures in Red*

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Minshall, artist in Trinidad and Tobago's mas, underlines his fascination with the character of the "bat": "Yes I adore the Robber, the Bat. But the Bat was right for the '50s, he is quaint now because his competition really is Darth Vader. Today it's movies, television. So we have to learn what the Bat or Robber teach us—about dancing the mas', about mobility – and not just re-create them, but find their contemporary equivalents." (Quoted in Riggio 116).

*Boat* (2005-07), *Music of the Future* (2002-07), *Lapeyrouse Wall* (2004)), Doig nevertheless underlines the permeability of those frontiers. *Man dressed as Bat* shows the blurred depiction of a shoreline as a typical backdrop of Trinidad. The transgressive quality of the beach, often seen in combination with Carnival, furthers the intensity of the thematic, of transgression, in Doig's work. The beach could be seen in *Man dressed as Bat* as a way of working through two opposed directions, the removal of fixed boundaries and depictions exposed to constant erosion on the one hand, and the emphasis on remaining traces and residue on the other. These processes deal in painterly terms with the limiting of representation and the emphasis on the other side of the presence of the canvas.<sup>3</sup> The relaxation of social norms and restrictions, too, is reflected in the beach as a place of Carnival, standing for a transformation of the body: "The *Carnivalesque* zone... liberated subjects from the *micro-powers* encouraging the norms, propriety, and the social dressage of the industrial workers" (Shields 94). Other samples of Doig's work frequently reference symbols and sites of transition such as streets, rivers, gates, etc.<sup>4</sup> The transformative qualities in Doig's work can be observed on a formal level, often characterized as "unforeseen events" or "accidents" but also on a conceptual level (Shiff 27). Shiff discusses Doig's paintings as not being still, static or bound to a clear structure and draws a close link between the formal quality of the paintings and the conceptual framework (Shiff 22). This transformative quality is also reflected in Doig's imaginary spaces of remote, exotic areas, often figured in the site of the beach. Here a discussion of the primitive comes into play where the insinuation of the "elsewhere" and the frequent emphasis on organic interconnection often paradoxically correlates with the reinstatement of exactly those boundaries. As Crichlow and Armstrong argue, the focus on carnival has shifted from a focus on deflation of binaries towards a more at hybrid and dialogic aspects, and the white bat epitomizes such ambiguity (Crichlow and Armstrong 400).

By deviating from the central focal point of the painting, Doig leaves the actual center of the painting, the figure of the bat, untouched and draws the attention towards the periphery of the painting. Beyond this formal aspect, the white rendered bat offers references to Doig's work and his frequent depiction of snow. Beyond its paradoxical quality of emptiness and fullness, the white color here underlines a further conceptual aspect of seeing, both to the bottom and top of the canvas, in what has been described as "screen over a screen" (Shiff 30). While the white bat can be looked at in formal terms, it further can be interpreted as covering or removing the painterly marks, which Harrison argues is a particular modern interest of "cancellation or erasure of descriptive

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<sup>3</sup> For a further discussion of the beach see Philippe Cygan and Christian Mieves' "Introduction: Revisiting the Beach" (2010).

<sup>4</sup> Change and transition have frequently been associated with peripheral spaces such as outskirts of cities or islands reflecting geographical but also ontological liminality. See Shields 1991, Kevin Hetherington, "In Place of Geometry: The Materiality of Place" (1997) and Edward W. Soja's *Thirdspace: Expanding the Geographical Imagination* (1996).

signifying content” (Harrison 292).

The use of photographic source material in Doig’s paintings, where both media seem to merge, results in a particular type of surface, “one that somehow or other erodes the potential pictorial organization of its imagery in favor of a dissolution into sheer texture, sheer sensation,” a characteristic which further underlines an on-going fascination for the transgression of hierarchies (Schwabsky 29). This is clearly reflected in *Man dressed as Bat* described by Searle as looking “like a pressed flower or butterfly” (Searle 2008). The constructedness of the image is pointed to here in the instability of background/foreground where the figure paradoxically allows the spectator a glimpse of the uncovered background. Since these uncovered, flattened areas of canvas lie symptomatically within the figure of the bat, the bat evolves into “an active pictorial and discursive operation” (Enwezor 74). The close connection of the body to its surroundings, characteristic of the *Carnivalesque* trope, puts particular emphasis on the relation between the body and its surroundings, “those parts of the body that are open to the outside world” (Bakhtin 26). The character in *Man dressed as Bat* never transforms totally into a mammal. That illusion (of metamorphosis) and the restriction of that potential transgression render the figure of the man profoundly ambiguous. The flat, stark canvas draws the spectator’s gaze onto the flattened shades, delivering an awareness of the limitations and the restrictions of the representation here. The flatness and leveling of the figure, in both formal and metaphorical terms, finds it enmeshed in a very romanticized depiction of the open sea, and thus points up Doig’s sensitive inquiry into the possibility and limits of representativeness in his paintings. Flatness in Doig’s work therefore becomes a crucial instrument reflecting his critical examination of formal and interpretive limits.

#### CASE STUDY 2: MASQUERADE, FLATTENING AND THE ILLUSION OF THE “OTHER”

The complex relationship between carnival practices and flattening is vividly realized through masquerade. Masks and masking practices are imbued with notions of identity and representation. They are considered “essential to carnivals everywhere,” visually marking the presence of revelers in the events while bringing to the surface attitudes and behaviors often repressed in the everyday (Aching 415).

New and different identities are reproduced and represented through masquerade. Yet, critically, these identities are transitory and, drawing upon a myriad of images and icons, fashion fictive senses of Self that obscure historical and social power realities. The concept of flattening enables us to examine masquerade through its ambiguities and multi-layered symbolism, thereby revealing with more clarity the social equalizing implicit in the subversive play of Trinidad’s Carnival. The earliest Carnivals on Trinidad

“consisted primarily of bourgeois costume balls and street promenades for the whites and free blacks” (Brown 83). Masqueraders wore costumes strongly linked to Europe, with whites and blacks dressing as kings, queens or other aristocrats. What eventually happened, however, was that whites took on costumes identified with Trinidad blacks: women “dressed in color costumes of their mulatto maids” while men “dressed as field slaves (the *nejardin*)” (Brown 83).

By superimposing one identity upon another, these masqueraders necessitated a cultural shift or rupture, temporarily flattening the boundaries that separated them. It was not that black Trinidadians “became” royal subjects or that whites on the island “became” field slaves. Rather, the power of Carnival masquerade was assumed through the illusion of Othering. When slavery was abolished, however, whites stopped participating in Carnival’s role reversals. “Apparently, the mulatto-maid and *negre jardin* characters did not want to rub shoulders with the real thing” (Brown 84). Without the benefit of illusion, the boundaries between real and unreal were reclaimed, and lines of difference redrawn. As a highly charged signifier of flattening, masquerade was used during early Carnival events to negotiate Trinidad’s unresolved colonial histories. Contemporary masquerading continues to give coded expression to the attitudes and values operating in the everyday. Revelers continue to use masquerade to cast new views and desires on reality, and to bring balance—albeit temporarily—to the on-going, unresolved racial conflicts and social contradictions of the island.



Figure 2. Photo of *Queen of the Bands*, “French Revolution” (2007)

An example can be found with the *Queen of the Bands* costume worn by Inez Gould, a member of *Trini Revelers*, and entitled ‘The French Revolution’ (see Figure 2). The dramatic costume seems to emphasize both reverence for and mockery of Trinidad’s French colonial past and Carnival roots. The idea of the chandelier is borrowed here as an icon of aristocratic France, suggesting a “complicity with high culture” that, in its mocking novelty, invokes a self-conscious and critical distancing from France (Barthes 119). It purposefully challenges the cultural and racial boundaries framing Trinidad’s colonial history by publically redefining how power can be assumed or refuted. The costume “ultimately enhances the value of oral sources as historical documents because such discrepancies reveal how ordinary people caught up in historical events make sense of their experiences,” making this commemoration of the French revolution itself an event worthy of historical analysis (Portelli 26). “The French Revolution,” can be viewed as a throwback to the earliest Carnival, when the French mimicked blacks, wearing the dress and aping the perceived customs of the enslaved community. Yet in this contemporary portrayal the past relies on the present, and the present on the past. The two becoming inseparable, with the Queen bound in both space and time. In this flattening of past and present, the Queen “reveals memory to be cultural [and] fantasy to be social and political”, demonstrating that colonialism continues to impact modern-day identity, shaping imagination while creating memories (Hirsch 7).

The intent of the chandelier in this costume can be viewed as both simple and complex. At its simplest, it mediates a history (albeit less than subtly) that links Trinidad to France. The chandelier takes on a strange familiarity, which, when matched with an extended wig and distinctive *pouf*-styled coiffure, represents some stock images that in popular culture have come to define France. At its most complex, the chandelier can be read as a boundary that divides Trinidad’s relationship to history into an inside and an outside. Standing inside the chandelier, the Queen comes to personify Trinidad’s colonial history, her costume the incarnation of principles of power, possession and conquest. Although the Afro-Trinidadian woman may on her own represent a comparatively different history, in ‘becoming’ the chandelier—an image of colonial France and sophistication—the Queen “exercises the great function of the imaginary, which is [her] freedom, since no history, however, dark, could ever deprive [her] of it” (qtd in Perloff 213). To borrow from the three myths Barthes has identified with the Eiffel Tower (another symbol of France), when reincarnated as the chandelier, the Queen can be viewed as embodying “the idea of a ruthless, triumphant domination”; Trinidad’s colonial history is at that moment no longer to be struggled with or mastered. The size of the chandelier follows Barthes’ second myth, with the Queen representing now “the symbol of ascension, the rise of ascension.” The third myth is associated with the Eiffel Tower’s *ajoure* (iron fretwork), which is also captured in “The French Revolution,” the seeming heaviness of the chandelier arms creating “a piece of iron lace” that peacefully sways on its

extended column. To again borrow from Barthes, the chandelier represents “a look, an object, a symbol...[it is] a spectacle looked at and looking, a useless and irreplaceable edifice, a familiar world and a heroic symbol...[an] imitable object yet ceaselessly reproduced, it is the pure sign, open to all seasons, to all images, and to all senses, the unbridled metaphor” (qtd in Perloff 213).

Revelers sitting at the sidelines are placed in the position of decoder, the chandelier conveying symbolic meaning that they experience through individual and personal memories and imaginations; viewed “as political testimony” or enjoyed as “good historical scenes” (Barthes 27). The chandelier stands as a shadow of colonialism; yet, in making that past visible, it enables the onlooker to see “oneself (differently from in a mirror): on the scale of History” (Barthes 12). The present and the past appear seamless, and the relationship between contemporary and historical seems fluid, as onlookers “construc[t] a shared past which is continuous with the present” (Williams 2010). Through the process of flattening, “The French Revolution” reduces Trinidad’s colonial past into a visual object, conjuring fantasy and historical remembrance simultaneously and interchangeably to both the onlooker and the Queen herself; and history becomes an act of regulation, contained as part of the Carnival landscape that can be produced and reproduced in and through the practices of Trinidad Carnival authority.

### CASE STUDY 3: OFILI, COLLECTIVE RESISTANCE, AND IMPEDIMENTS OF FLATTENING

English-born painter Chris Ofili, who has lived since 2005 in Trinidad, employs in his work an array of strategies that question notions of representation. Ofili’s “outsider” role in Trinidad, similar to Peter Doig, has frequently provoked critique about the motivation and the legitimacy of his work responding to the new location, and has been dismissed as mere exoticism (Wainwright 32). However, Ofili, of Nigerian decent, reflects in his work in particular on the ambiguous and complex identities explored through the concept of flattening. Trinidad becomes the backdrop for the “return” of an estranged member of the African community.<sup>5</sup> Obscuring the line between insider and outsider, his work since 2005 marks a drastic departure from his earlier work (Nesbitt 20). His previous work had been marked by the use of materials such as glitter, collaged images and elephant dung which became a widely recognized aspect of his work and which added a three-dimensional component to his paintings. His current work since his arrival in Trinidad, by contrast, is characterized by a deliberate flatness, starting with the *Blue Riders*

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<sup>5</sup> In 2006, Ofili and other non-native artists in Trinidad showcased their work in an exhibition “A Suitable Distance” in order to encourage a debate between Caribbean and Non-Caribbean identities. See Leon Wainwright’s *A Suitable Distance: Impressions of Trinidad by Five Artist: Rex Dixon, Peter Doig, Kofi Kayiga, Chris Ofili* (2006).

series (2005-08).<sup>6</sup> Exploring the idea of impermanence and transitoriness, thereby also linked closely to the Carnavalesque trope, Ofili superimposes symbols of Trinidad with religious iconography and explores in his painterly flatness some of the ways it might enable a deflation of preconceived dualities (Enwezor 74).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Part of the series has been exhibited first at Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin (2005), and then in Kestnergesellschaft, Hannover (2006).

<sup>7</sup> “In my painting, the guy on the right with the white shirt comes from contemporary images of Trinidad stick fighting. He is also dressed a little bit like how farmers and hunters dress in the forest. A lot of these ideas are based in reality...” Ofili in Ekow Eshun, “Ekow Eshun interviews Chris Ofili” (Nesbitt 99).



Figure 3. Chris Ofili, *Iscariot Blues*, 2006, Oil and charcoal on linen  
281 x 194.9 cm, 110 10/16 x 76 11/16 inches  
Private collection, © Chris Ofili Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London



Figure 4. Traditional Good Friday *Bobolee*, Trinidad.

*Iscariot Blues* (2006) (see Figure 3), part of the *Blue Riders* series, enacts a process of leveling by applying a dark indigo film onto the painting surface. Its use of the blue suggests Ofili's insider knowledge of the common Carnival creature the blue-painted Devil, who is known for "stalk[ing] the streets, sometimes holding back, by means of an impressive set of chains," "a particularly vicious devil or beast" (Scher 113). The blue is aligned in Carnival to meanings of "evil" and "destruction" (Alleyne-Dettmers 253). This painting, insinuating the narrative of the Apostle Judas Iscariot, also shows *Parang*<sup>8</sup> playing musicians next to a hanged body. On a formal level, the painting appears to be a deliberate reduction of means, narrowing the shades and hues down to a highly restricted palette. The dark indigo washes reduce the contrast as well as the shapes of the figures in the painting. As inspiration for the flat character of his paintings Ofili describes plywood cut-outs of musicians whose flatness he "was trying to achieve in [his] own work" (Ofili and Doig, 2007). At the thematic level a similar leveling of difference occurs (Cambell 28), as Ofili suggests in his comments on the Judas character: "So it was interesting that he could be transformed from the 'baddie' to a 'goodie' all of a sudden. There is an energy around this that I felt was worth finding a picture to depict" (Eshun 99). Indeed, the role of the disciple Judas has been reevaluated in recent years.<sup>9</sup> It is this idea of ambiguity and the leveling of differences, which allow Ofili to exercise the flattening of categories in formal and thematic terms: the juxtaposition of opposite elements such as the musicians/dead body or the ambiguous Apostle figure in Ofili's exploration of flattening, in line with his aspiration to incorporate a wide range of contradictory meanings in his work (Lange 101).

Ofili's *Iscariot Blues* demonstrates close similarities with the Trinidadian traditions of Good Friday and the usual *beating of the Bobolee*.<sup>10</sup> Beating an effigy of Judas, as another form of literally flattening, engages in the act of lifting the mask and revealing the betrayal, a moment of clarity and truth. However, the hanged character in Ofili's painting remains simultaneously both effigy and disciple. Questioning these aspects of what can be seen and what can be determined in his paintings, Ofili clearly seeks here to openly challenge the limits of painterly representation.

References to the local environs of Trinidad in Ofili's paintings are frequent and have been described by the artist as unspoiled and "raw."<sup>11</sup> Characters in the paintings are dressed in local dress or references are drawn

<sup>8</sup> Popular folk music in Trinidad and Tobago.

<sup>9</sup> It has been suggested that Judas can also be seen as 'enlightened' figure in contrast to the betrayal he is usually associated with. See Kim Paffenroth's *Images of the lost disciple* (2001)

<sup>10</sup> Easter tradition in Trinidad: On Good Friday an effigy of Judas, tied by the neck, is dragged through the streets, usually followed by youths with sticks, beating it.

<sup>11</sup> In an interview Ofili confesses: "Trinidad is still fairly raw, or in such a state that it can be 'improved,' let's say. But people fear that the character might be lost in favor of a Miami type of lifestyle. I think that's often why people in Trinidad get suspicious as to why you're here. You know, only on Friday I was asked that question: Why are you here? I didn't have an answer; I'm actually quite comfortable with not knowing." (Ofili 2007)

to traditional forms of music and customs. Employing stark unmediated differences, most of the paintings employ abrupt dualities and vertical binary structural juxtapositions of light/dark, inside/outside (see *Confession (Lady Chancellor)*, (2007), *Habio Green Locks* (2009) *Death & the Roses* (2009)). But, as in the above-mentioned paintings, the clear cut harsh contrast avoids a visual overlap or merging. And yet, despite its sometimes formal contrasts, ontologically the paintings seem to be smoothing differences, proposing a more ambiguous mode. At this point, the flatness of painting becomes a “fascinating instrument for articulating the artificiality of the flat plane” (Enwezor 74).

*Iscariot Blues* exemplifies this flattening of differences. And despite the fact that Ofili’s work does not focus exclusively on Trinidadian carnival, but the immediate aftermath, his work clearly deals with crucial carnivalesque aspects of masking and concealing and the idea of deceit. And as has been argued elsewhere, the “flattening effect” often places a particular emphasis on the paradoxical relationship between flatness and openness (House and Keiler 100, Hyman 13). However, aspects of flattening in Ofili’s work go beyond the mere formal aspect. Flattening here further enables a questioning of a “culturally conditioned play of stereotype” (Joselit 20). *Iscariot Blues* deals with the flattened depictions and ambiguous iconography, common in Ofili’s work. The painting takes a “strategic approach...of deciphering the pictorial field as an antagonistic field where nothing is ever terminated, decided once and for all” (Bois 256). The discursive quality, challenging the viewer to form a response to the painting, tests, questions and points openly to the limits of representation, not just in the painterly but also more broadly in the predicament of Carnival itself.

The darkened and flattened qualities of Ofili’s paintings, then, point to a particularly ambiguous, abstract and sensuous strategy enacted in his work. The black paintings of American painter Ad Reinhardt, for instance, have been characterized as suspended in hybridity, as indulging in an “androgyny of concept and sensuousness” (Kaneda 58). A similarly gendered reading could be applied to Ofili’s work through the perception of emptiness and incompleteness, in areas of *Iscariot Blues*, which explore the liminality of the large emptiness/absence versus abstraction/presence. *Iscariot Blues* radicalizes this relation in so far as the Judas figure assumes an ambiguous position between black/blank or puppet/person. As shown above, Ofili’s work clearly deflates preconceived categorizations of painting, and it seems to illustrate, to a certain extent, also his personal experience in Trinidad: “I have a camouflage. Although I am not from here, my skin can camouflage the fact, and allow me to be in places that perhaps would be more difficult if I did not have this camouflage” (Eshun 96). In various accounts Ofili shows an awareness of the complexities and vulnerability of Trinidad identities and the threat of losing them. This “avoiding” of “treacherous light” becomes particularly relevant in the context of the Judas figure. Judas makes Christ *visible* and extradites him to the Roman soldiers (Bersani and Dutoit 17).

Ofilí's work, however, seems to suggest the opposite. He does not expose Judas to the clear light but flattens the contrast and color gambit. He not only underlines the artificiality of the flat plane, but, moreover, exposes the limitedness of that plane.

The flattening of layers and leveling of the means of representation resonate also with Ofilí's description of the twilight in Trinidad as having a particular influence in his work:

I have found that the night and the twilight here enhances the imagination. In the city our relationship to the night is very particular because it is always illuminated, but here it is unlit, so you are relying on the light of the moon and sensitivity of the eyes. It is a different level of consciousness that is less familiar to me, and stimulating through a degree of fear and mystery. ...Most of what you see is what you think you see, it is not actually what is in front of you. And if the mind is in a particular state, you 'll open up the possibilities of what you are seeing, which may be purely imagined' (Eshun 103).

These "different level of consciousness" refer here to a key strategy in Ofilí's work we have already described above, its tendency to use both the flattening of various structural and thematic levels, and the increasing thematic appeal to iconographic transitoriness (the "fleeting" quality of his images), as a way of enquiring into the nature and limits of representation. Ofilí's approach is thus deeply grounded in Trinidad's history and, by expanding aspects of transgression beyond the restricted period of Carnival, can be seen to be searching out opportunities to allow for a broader understanding of reality and identity on the island.

## CONCLUSION

An important aspect of this essay has been to bring together the historical and visual elements in Carnival for the purpose of examining representations of flattening. It set out to explore the otherwise ambiguous quality of leveling by looking at instances of flattening from figurative art to carnival masquerade, and its potential approximations. As in painting, where flattening transforms an object with new perspectives, color and contrast, flattening in Carnival offers an opportunity for participants to envisage a different reality, and for researchers to discuss that complex process. Histories of flattening have been introduced in this article as having emerged out of political and cultural difference and out of acts of domination. Positions of rank, power and prestige blur through flattening. Yet, as we have argued, hierarchies do not simply collapse. Rather, differences multiply; in the undoing of binary divisions through the flattening of boundaries, movement between them is

made possible. Hierarchies do not disappear, but rather finer gradations within them are created and sustained. In the flattening of difference, the relation between “center” and “periphery” shifts; in so doing, boundaries proliferate, becoming part of a fluid and contradictory structure that can inscribe resistance as easily as erase it.

Our case studies offered three different frameworks proposing distinctive modes of flattening. Despite the apparent similarities in the overlap and merging of semantic fields, these case studies engage in different ways with the processes of blending and leveling. In their collective analysis, flattening is presented through multiple perspectives from diverse disciplines, providing a dialogue through which difference can be shared and in which debates are identified and resolved; and thus, new ways of addressing those differences can emerge. Since surfaces are prisms of cultural and social transformations the attention to flattening is not restricted to the modernist discussion of abstract, formal qualities, but is viewed in relation to a wide range of surfaces (Ward 1). Furthermore, changes toward and limiting of these surfaces are considered—as Lefebvre has argued—through its social impact and as a restructuring space (Lefebvre 45). Here, “flatness may serve as a powerful metaphor for the price we pay in transforming ourselves into images—a compulsory self-spectacularization which is the necessary condition of entering the public sphere in the world of late capitalism” (Lefebvre 45); as a tension between the physical leveling of representation and its metaphorical deflation, what has been referred to as the “ambiguous quality of flatness” (Bal 3); igniting an absence of depth that, in its “disappointing and deceptive nature,” becomes linked to an allegorical quality that allows us to interrogate further to the ambiguous trope of the carnivalesque (Bal 3).

The liminal and fleeting identity of the Carnival figure in Doig’s work *Man dressed as Bat*, for example, reveals a strategy in flattening that facilitates a reconciliation and inversion of opposites, bringing together ideologies of absence and presence, figure and ground, human and animal, leveling formal and semantic dichotomies in a way that allows for further self-transformation and change. Similarly, the “French Revolution” brings together notions of past and present, reveler and chandelier, person and object, participant and spectator, in ways that collapse binary structures and do away with closure; the flattening of difference functioning as both resistance and accommodation, able to invert and displace binaries in ways such that reality itself becomes reconceptualized. Through the use of flattening, Ofili’s *Iscariot Blues* emerges as a model of disruptive differences, unsettling binary structures of power and social relations that open polarities to change. In each case study, the process of flattening not unexpectedly evokes a radicalization of difference, which therefore enables a test field by which to unravel the complex and often contradictory aspects of identity construction. In this way, flattening emerges as an aesthetic as well as cultural practice, and indeed, that distinction becomes difficult to maintain; this is a relentless

flattening, producing aesthetic and compositional coherence that can effectively portray the fundamental changes in representations of difference in Carnival.

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