SARGASSO Interview

Sargasso 2005-06, I Caribbean Representations: Reconsidering Old Myths

"Barbados, the land of pretense . . ."  
A Conversation with Diva  
Alexander de Beauvoir

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Contemporary Barbadian culture is a postmodern and variegated terrain comprised of multiple perspectives emanating from the histories of colonization, slavery, tourism, independence, post-colonization, and neo-colonization. The people who live on the small island nation of Barbados continually absorb a confluence of complex cultural and historical currents; however, textual representations of Barbados and the Caribbean in general gravitate towards two extremes. On one hand, there is an important and growing range of interdisciplinary scholarship about the Caribbean as well as an acclaimed body of literature. On the other hand, there is also a pervasive counter-narrative that, unfortunately, is more familiar to the general public. Tourist guide books, films, and advertisements create a powerful portrait of the Caribbean that reduces its complex histories, cultures, and intellectual traditions to invisibility and erects a portrait of the Caribbean as the ultimate earthly paradise—a terrain at once primal and contained, where the fantasy of happy and accommodating “natives” reduces the residents of the various islands to the status of willing and benign servants.

The complex economic negotiations generated by the Caribbean’s arguably necessary dependence on tourism perpetuate homogenous constructions of the region and even motivate reductive and implicit self-depictions. For example, the official website of Barbados’ Tourism Authority describes Barbados, and more importantly, Bajans themselves in the following manner:

Barbados is a very beautiful island, with lots of art, activities, night life, music, history, and some of the best restaurants to be found anywhere.

But what makes Barbados even more special, and the reason why so many visitors keep returning to the island year after year, is the people. Barbadians, called Bajans, are warm and friendly souls, always ready to greet you with a sincere smile. Barbadians make you feel welcome and special, in this lovely Caribbean Island. You’ll feel its your home and you will want to come back again and again [...]

In this representation, the people of Barbados become its most valuable commodity because of their “natural” ability to serve and placate the tourist / consumer. This depiction is the most familiar portrait of Barbadians and of the residents of the Caribbean generally. As Polly Pattullo has written,

Not only the place but the people, too, are required to conform to this stereotype. The Caribbean person, from the Amerindians whom Columbus met in that initial encounter to the twentieth-century taxi-driver whom tourists meet at the airport, are expected to satisfy those images associated with paradise and Eden. The images are crude: of happy carefree, fun-loving men and women, colourful in behaviour, whose life is one of daytime indolence beneath the palms and a nighttime of pleasure though music, dance and sex (142).

The historical weight of these images is overwhelming and highlights the necessity of textual interventions in the interruption of these discourses.

In addition to the political work of fictional texts by Caribbean writers, oral narratives from Caribbean peoples open the door for the rewriting of these limited and limiting constructions. In Bajan vernacular, the word doormouth means a threshold. The oral narrative format becomes a doormouth—an opportunity to resist the hegemonic representations of the people of the Caribbean through the centering of autobiographical self-representation. The potentially resistive qualities of oral narrative mirrors the work of Caribbean fiction writers such as Maryse Conde and Michelle Cliff, who use their texts to “rediscover their pasts and rewrite their history in their own words, transforming that which has been suppressed by those who have held cultural power” (Herndon 731). For example, Michelle Cliff’s creation of the transgendered Harry/Harriet character in her novel No Telephone to Heaven is perhaps one of the most compelling representations of the multiplicity and liminality of the Caribbean. Cliff’s Harry/Harriet inhabits and epitomizes the complexities of post-colonial Caribbean identities—following a brutalizing and violating youth, Harry/Harriet is both a vital and insightful center for “her” community, yet s/he is not only unappreciated, s/he experiences a prophet’s rejection. S/he also embodies revolutionary resistance grounded in a rejection of the political, economic, and ideological systems that are the source of the oppressions s/he experiences.

As Francoise Lionnet has asserted, the writings of Caribbean authors such as Cliff enact "an unrelenting search for a different past, to be exhumed from the rubble of patriarchal and racist obfuscations" (4). Oral narratives facilitate the same (re)presentation of the Caribbean subject by refocusing the gaze from outsider to insider and by allowing for the reclamation of narrative control. The following interview with Bajan transgendered performer Diva Alexander de Beauvoir is a model for the reclamation of narrative constructions through the act of self-representation. As Diva explains, her public performance of female gender identification is both revolutionary and resistant and, as such, is often experienced as extremely threatening and dangerous. Significantly, at the time of this writing Diva is also the only openly gay, transgendered calypsonian on the island, performing with one of the most respected and popular tents on the island, Virgin Atlantic. She writes her own material, and performs during Barbados’ annual carnival, Cropover. She conceives of herself as a trailblazer and freedom fighter whose resistance to oppression has liberatory possibilities not only for herself, but also potentially for Barbados and the world. This interview with her provides a window, or a doormouth, into an important and relatively unexplored aspect of anglophone Caribbean cultures and presents revealing insights regarding the intersections of performance, gender, identity, nationalism, and culture. The interview that follows is Diva’s frank, revealing, and often wrenching account of her life.

To begin our interview, I asked Diva questions about her family of origin and her life experiences. These questions revealed a deep sense of pessimism and an almost jeremiad-like sense of the decline of the Bajan social and moral fabric.

“That’s what I like about me, the element of surprise.”

CG- You were born in Barbados? You’ve been here your whole life?

DA- Yes, I’ve been here my whole life. I’ve been born here. Went to school here. Went to college here. A different environment would do me a lot of good. It has changed over the years. I am thirty-three next month. I’ve seen changes gradually, like ten-year periods, decades of changes which have been taking place here. In terms of social standing—in terms of social manners there is a change. A very strong change.

CG- Do you mean people are more accepting?

DA- No, I find people are more aggressive these days. They are not as genuine. They are not as caring as they were years ago. We were poor, but you could depend upon your neighbor for anything. I mean, I grew up in a middle class society, but I—my mother didn’t raise me—my aunt raised me. We had it all, but my mother was very poor and I used to go there on summers to visit my siblings. And there was a difference, but it was much happier with them. You were very satisfied with what you had and you made do with what you had. I lived all over. I moved like twelve times in my life. I didn’t stay in any particular area for too long. It was like a five-seven year span and then I moved on. It wasn’t my doing. It was my parents. My foster parents I should say.

CG- What do you think is causing the change in Bajan culture?

DA- Ok. The first thing I can probably say is drugs. There is a definite clamor for money and for fast money and that in itself is causing the social fabric to decline or to shred away. Because everybody wants to have a big car, big house, nice clothes. Money in the pocket. Everybody is looking at what everybody else has and they’re not saying, “hey my turn will come.” We’re not all supposed to be on the same level. Everybody is just like, “I must have this I must have that,” and because of that we find people putting themselves in debt, way out of their boundary and then having to—how should I say—having to deal with it, then having to make the money quickly. . . drugs, whether it be. . . prostitution. When I say prostitution I don’t mean standing on the street corner because there are men and women selling their bodies without standing on the street corner. But when you think about it, it is all prostitution. When they have a man or a boyfriend who comes to their house or whatever. It’s the same thing as far as I’m concerned.

CG- So are you saying that prostitution presents a viable avenue for people to make money here?
DA- It is easy if selling your soul is easy, if you don’t want to get up and work. ‘Cause what is really happening here is that a lot of young guys on the street . . . I don’t know whether it is lack of love or solace in their home, because I find a lot of young boys lack a certain degree of nurturing from their mothers and their fathers. I talk to them and I try to understand why they do the things they do. Some of them hustle for money. I mean I call up and offer and I say I have someone here who wants a job whether it be pumping gas, working on a plantation whatever. I think a job is a job is a job is a job as long as you’re getting money. They don’t want to do that. They don’t want a job where they have to labor too hard or sweat, or go through too many wears and tears. They just want the money put in their hand. They go off and they shop with that. That is a generation of spoiled children. That’s what I call them. I worked at supermarkets, picked potatoes. I cut cane. This is when I was young because I had to do it because I wanted the experience and I was in cadets and look at me today—hey, hey, hey. It’s [cadets] kind of a military thing and nobody would ever look at me and think I had done these things. That’s what I like about me, the element of surprise.

Back to your question about it being easier. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t be a prostitute because it takes a lot of . . . that level of psychological wear and tear of it I couldn’t deal with. I am a very spiritual person . . . in the context of not religious but spiritual about my soul and my being and my purpose. And prostitution, I am not beating anybody, but I couldn’t do it. Having sex with ten to twelve people a night. I couldn’t do it. There are some people who can get it done. I can give you some names and you can go in the street and talk to them. Believe it or not when we first started doing the show at Ragamuffins, a lot of the locals thought that we were prostitutes in a glamified arena. It only came up after this guy who was gay said that a lot of folks think that you pick up these white people. I said [inhalation of breath] and laughed

it off but after I got home I said to myself, I guess if I was them looking in at the whole thing. . . I did a lot of raunchy stuff at first. We have children coming in and everything and I toned it right down. A lot of people thought that we were selling our bodies and I thought—“Oh my God.”

CG- Is your family accepting of who you are?

DA- My family loves me. They think that I am the best, the bomb everything. They know me from small. It’s something that they tried to fight, but then they say hey, I’m a person. I have something to do. I’m not robbing, killing stealing. I’m just doing my thing. If we were to come together and pool our resources, I am sure that we could do something fabulous. We have a lot of talent in Barbados, but a lot of people who are here are not given the chances. People that should have explored and expanded their talents.

CG- Do you use the name Diva exclusively now?

DA- Everybody knows me as Diva. And frankly, that name was pinned on me twelve years ago. I did not like it. Before, everybody was “Diva this Diva that.” These girls from the Bahamas—I used to do a lot of shows at the campus [University of the West Indies, Cave Hill] here. I used to do a lot of queen shows here and the kids would see me coming and call out “Diva!” and I hated it because I thought it was an old washed up singer. But after I won this queen show, I had no name and I thought, “what am I going to call myself?” Then we met this guy called Alex and we were very good friends and up to the night of the show I had no name. I need a name so I said my name was Diva Gabriella . . . I had this long name that I could not remember when I got on stage and I was in my national costume and thinking what am I going to say? So I said, “my name is Diva Alexander,” and it went from there. Hence Diva was born. I added the de Beauvoir, to see beauty or of seeing beauty, because I like French. I studied French and I like the tongue and the language. This African friend of mine gave me another name, Mundia.

CG- Do you find that women are jealous of you?

DA- Girl! Why did you have to go there? Women here are so insecure. Like on a fine day where I will be walking and looking foxy, when I wear wigs and the men were checking you. And the women will say, “what are you looking at that for?” She has a man. I don’t. What’s the big thing?

CG- Are you dating anyone now?

DA- Sorta kinda. Sorta kinda. I like strong men. Not physically strong. Strong here [indicates heart]. A man who will get me to do what they want in a smart way. Not physical strength. It must be up here [indicates head].
CG- How do you define beauty? What is beautiful to you?

DA- Personality.

CG- So then, why the emphasis on the physical?

DA- The physical is just a symbolic thing. Beauty to me is in the spirit. I look into the eyes. Beauty to me is a thing that flows like the chi. It flows out.

CG- Do you have any drag kings here? Women who are dressed like men?

DA- We have girls here who actually pass for guys on the block. Up to two days ago, I myself was looking at this guy walking and Bianca [one of the other performers in Diva’s Ragamuffins show] said, “that is a girl,” and I said, “What?! A girl as in a girl?” She said, “That is a woman not a man there.”

Oh my god. It was like a paradigm shift. There she was eyeing me and I was eyeing her and I just laughed. It was funny. We have girls here who look like real guys. Some have like a beard thing going on. Some have breasts taped. This girl’s name is Shelley but she goes by Shawn and you would never know. She looks like a beach boy. She had me going for a while and I had her going at one point too. Another girl too that I used to hang with. She was a lesbian. She died. God rest her. This is for you girl [pours some of her wine on the ground].

CG- What does spirituality mean to you?

DA- Well it doesn’t matter what color you are. If you’re gay or you’re straight. He [God] ain’t about that. There are some gay people who are very nice. There are some that are very nasty. There are some straight people who are very nice and some who are very nasty. The rain falls on the just and the unjust and people need to understand that spiritual means not physical. We really need to look into that. Churches don’t teach people what they need to know. They just want people to come to church—put money in that box. They’re not feeding them the truth. As long as I am here and God give me the breath, I will educate people about what I know and what works for me.

We have to respect the Earth number one because she’s our foundation. Respect each other ‘cause we’re all part of each other. We’re all family. You are my sister. You are my brother. In this world when you get anything, give it back. It’s not yours. If you get a blessing today, give it back tomorrow. Share it with somebody. Don’t keep it. If you’re born into money, blessed are you, but give something. Do something for somebody. Plant a tree. Do something. Give the Earth back her due and that’s what we’re not doing. We’re concentrating on money. Money’s the biggest thing now for people.

I think my karma put me here, but I yearn to be in Europe all the time. But my karma set me in a third world country, in the tropics, in a hot climate. I love the fall. I don’t like the snow, but I like the fall. I like that cool weather. I always did. [In Europe] I wasn’t wearing jackets and people were like, “what’s wrong with you guys? How come you are not cold?” I said, “cause I don’t feel cold.” It was a beautiful experience. Really, really lovely.

CG- Earlier you said that you cut cane when you were younger. What was it like for you?

DA- It was fun. I didn’t do it to make money. I just did it because I wanted to see what it felt like. I wouldn’t do everything, but there are some things I would try. I wanted to feel my ancestral vibes coming through say, “hey how did it feel to be in the sun all day doing this?” Wow! I can’t handle this. How did they do this? I am mixed with Arawak. I am part Panamanian, Arawak, black, and Scottish white. My hands hurt like hell and that was it. I didn’t last a whole day. The sun was burning down. You have a lot of things going in your face. It’s not a glamorous job. Picking cotton. I want to go and do it. But then a guy said, “You don’t want to go.” ‘Cause you have to pick so much to make some money ‘cause you know cotton is . . . some people put rocks in the bag and stuff. I’ve washed cars for organizations. I’ve done things that most people say, “oh you don’t do those things ‘cause you do this and you do that.” There is nothing beneath me and there is nothing above me. That’s how I look at life.

CG- Do you watch TV?

DA- Of course.

CG- What do you like to watch?

DA- I don’t like those Hallmark movies. I don’t like those. I like drama. I like action. I like science fiction. I want to play on Star Trek. James Bond. There was a guy two years ago, a director for James Bond, and he said he wanted me in the next movie, but I don’t know. I haven’t heard from him, but I think I would do some damage in that movie. Grace Jones step back. Let me do my thing. I like movies that have strong male roles and strong female. Girls must be strong. Must be. I like Cleopatra Jones. I like Pam Greer. She’s a mixture of sex. She’s just ruthless and the thing is that she does it but she is still feminine about it. She doesn’t have to act masculine to do it. I like comedies. To me black comedies leave a lot to be desired. They are lacking something, especially black American comedies. They border on sex. They border on looks. They border on partying. I like Good Times. I
like Jeffersons. Moesha. I like Living Single and what’s the other one? Friends. To me those are ok. Then I had another one. That soap opera Generations. That was nice. Most of the black comedies I don’t watch. I think they are crappy. I love Are You Being Served. It is the ultimate. The English have a different sense of humor. They are different and they are very slap stick. I like slap stick in any comedy. It’s funny.

“Abstract is not my thing because I believe anybody can do that.”

Although Diva conceptualizes herself as a part of a tradition of transgendered performers in Barbados, she definitively distinguishes herself from that legacy through her assertion of the role her show has played in elevating that tradition. In terms of her self-conception as a performer, Diva differentiates her show, currently staged at a restaurant called Ragamuffins, from other such incarnations by what she terms as its “class.” She has a strictly, and rather traditionally structured sense of cultural capital that manifests itself in her discussions of clothing, manners, speech, and other factors that for her are markers of sophistication and propriety.

Diva is a multifaceted artist whose palette colors a multiplicity of generic canvases. She understands performance as a calling and her artistic production manifests itself as performance. Performance, in her conception, has tremendous agency and is inseparably connected to the imperative of catalyzing spiritual and intellectual understanding and transformation in others. The responses Diva generates from her various audiences are also potentially revelatory of the relationship between nationalism, popular cultures, and mimesis.

CG- Was yours the first transgendered show in Barbados?

DA- Well, not in Barbados. The first show of class. There were shows before in the city [Bridgetown]. Just little hush hush things on Baxter’s Road. Yeah, they used to have these little shows when I was a child. They had all of these different shows in the city. They were not as classy. What I’m doing here is to desensitize the public and to show them that—hey, people who you all consider different contribute in good ways to make people happy. Tourists come to Ragamuffins to see our show. We’ve been in several magazines outside the country. We’ve been in Hello magazine. We’ve been in Girl Talk in San Diego. We’ve been in numerous magazines and I believe we must be doing something right in order for this to be happening. It’s the strength of God and my willpower that keeps it going. We’ve been to London and we did performances in London.

CG- So you do shows all over the Caribbean, the world?

DA- Not the world. I'd do one in Japan. That's the place I want to go next, and Paris. I've been to the U.S. I've been to San Diego. I want to go to Miami. I've been to New York several times, not to perform, just to go and relax. I feel more comfortable in Europe, Italy. I've stopped off in Switzerland for a short while. Europe is my playground. If you believe in reincarnation, I've been told that my roots are in Tolange, France.

CG- What do you think you'll find there?

DA- Heaven knows. I'm not interested in what I'm going to find. I just want to know why. I just want to go with my feeling here. I don't know. There must be something. I don't know if sometimes you have an emptiness, whether it be a quest to find God or a quest to find your soul mate or to find peace and solace. There's always an emptiness there that you're looking to fill and that could be part of it too.

CG- You mentioned art. Do you draw as well?

DA- I'm an artist.

CG- What kind of work do you do?

DA- I do still life. I do portraits. Abstract is not my thing because I believe anybody can do that. This is art that I am doing now with the dancing. I am a fashion designer. I design all of the clothes for the show. I'm a big tall girl. I do weddings, I do pageants. As long as you have a foundation and a basis to be an artist you can do anything. I used to do graphic art at one point when I was seventeen. I did graphics. I did animation. It was just a matter of getting somebody to say you have too much talent, use it.

CG- Do you do the choreography for the show?

DA- I do. We make it as tight as possible. Some of us sing. Some don’t. But I try to get the girls [the other trans-gendered performers in Diva’s show, Bianca and Holly] to rehearse. The big one, [Bianca] she’s a dancer. She’s a star, so you don’t have to get her to do anything. She is a professional dancer so she is very nonchalant about rehearsing. But you need to rehearse. As a group of us there are three of us with totally different personalities. The two of them get on my nerves especially when we are traveling. Like I want to keep everybody in order ‘cause they are like here, there, everywhere. “Laughter, laughter, laughter.” It’s a big party for them and so much noise. I have a vision. I know where I want to go with this group. This group can go so far. They have to decide if they want to go too. I’m not going to have anybody hanging on my coattails. I have a vision and I know I must reach it. I must. I’ve been through too much in this country. I have to prove to myself that I can do it.
CG- When I was talking to you all the other day and I said “drag,” Bianca said that this is not a word that you use.

DA- We call it “showgirls.” We are showgirls. We do a show and we put on a show that is full of class. I’ve seen drag shows before and there is a difference to what we do. Drag shows are gaudy sometimes and everything is exaggerated. You find a lot of the queens go overboard. The attitude is nasty. They perform and they do some strange things. So we don’t say “drag.” We say “showgirls.” That’s the international word.

CG- Are you able to work exclusively at Ragamuffins and support yourself?

DA- No, that’s a side thing. I work during the week. We don’t only do Ragamuffins. We do the hotels. It’s a circuit that we do. We’ve done Sandy Lane [the most exclusive and expensive hotel on the island] once or twice. They’re a bit strange.

CG- Do you have to deal with a lot of obnoxious tourists?

DA- No, not really. I normally lay down the law very early. Holly is very passive and Bianca is very aggressive, and I am very firm.

CG- Do you choose your own music for the shows?

DA- I do songs that first of all when you listen to it had a kind of feeling. Neal, the owner [of Ragamuffins], likes a lot of techno stuff. He is British. But you feel the music. There are some songs that I would do that I just didn’t feel. It has to have something that I can do, something dramatic. When I can burst out in flames. I do songs that are very strong women. I’m a disco freak.

The karaoke bar next door is trying to drown us out. [Next door to Ragamuffins restaurant, where Diva’s show is held each Sunday, there is a karaoke bar. The noise level competition between the people singing karaoke and Diva’s show is indicative of some of the hostility her show generates.] When we first started doing the show, they did not have karaoke there. We started pulling crowds. They had karaoke on Saturday nights. Our show is on Sunday. He [Neal, the owner of the karaoke bar] went through the gap [Bajan term for street] and said well hey, “I’m having the show on Sunday.” They saw the crowd coming and they decided to do it on Sunday too. After a while it was a competition between us two. We got loud. They got louder and it went out of hand. Then one night Neal called the police and they got offended and it was on from then. I would think that after four years they would get accustomed to what it is. We started in February 1998. So it’s four years.

CG- Do you have fans?
DA- We have fans and regulars. A lot of kids like me. They chase me around the hotels. The men here like tall women and women with big butts. It's not a West Indian thing to be tall, but when they see one they think it's something else.

Y'all didn't come to see my tent? [calypso tent during Barbados' annual carnival. Cropover] This is my fourth season. I was the biggest secret in the whole tent. People kept it hush hush. People came to see who this Diva was. Was it a man or was it a woman? That was the thing and I brought so many people to the tent that year. I did Whitney Houston. The next year, 2000, I sang two Calypsos. So I've been doing that since.

CG- You wrote them yourself?
DA- Yeah. I write all my songs. Say if you give me a song and I sing it. I don't feel it and I don't know what you want me to say. So I write from here [indicating her heart]. I've started writing songs for next year. God spare my life next year.

CG- Where did you go to school?
DA- I went to Combermere [one of the best preparatory schools on the island]. I had a good time at Combermere. At college I had a good time. I was supposed to go to Queen's College, but my uncle did something wrong and Combermere was my third choice. I got the marks for Queen's College, but I did not go. He went to Combermere so he said, "no you are going to Combermere." It doesn't matter though where you go. It's who you are when you come out. So I don't bother about school. Like Morehouse and Harvard and Princeton.

CG- What was your calypso about this year [2002]?
DA- It's called, "Taking Too Long to Come." It is a double entendre. People thought it was something nasty. It was about politics and the country. Things are so slow in this country to happen and people promising to do things can't get it done. The opening was like, I was in my nightly sleeping and my husband or boyfriend call and I was asking where was he and saying, "I was waiting on you so long to come." And then I tell him don't bother coming. 'Cause that's how the women do it. You know they wait for their boyfriends. And most of the guys go and then drink drink with their friends and then they come home two, three o'clock and then have sex. So that's what I was trying to portray. Hey, I know what y'all do too. And it was funny for a lot of people. I had on this duster. And when the band strikes up, I have on this glamorous gown. And everybody said, "Wow. Oh my God." Everybody thought that was something different, but I didn't do justice there 'cause it was only one song. Next year I'm going to put my all in to it. 'Cause there
are so many things that you can sing about and people are going to hate you for what you sing about but it’s a matter of you being honest about what you sing about. But you have to educate the people about what you sing.

CG- Do you wish you were born a woman?

DA- Yes I do. I mean, to emulate a woman. I mean, I admire women because they are really strong and women to me have a lot more to contribute than men. Men have it made but you notice how the trend is shifting. Women are doing what they are supposed to do. It hurts me when women put me down ‘cause I think so much of them. It hurts me to see when they look at me dirty and they say mean things about me. I have nothing against the guys. Believe me, they are such a comfort. But women, yeah, I’ve always wanted to be. As you get older, you accept how you are. You just go along with it. You don’t fight it anymore. I mean, yes I’ve had this thing about sex change. Those things came into my mind. I’ve never had any alterations. Besides, that’s a lot of money as far as I know.

I’m writing a song right now for next year. God spare my life, to sing for Cropover. It’s called “A Song for Men,” telling men exactly what their role is and what they should be doing. You know, and it just came to me last week. That’s how I write my songs. And it is going to be a beautiful song. I believe so. ‘Cause I’m not bashing them. I’m just telling them hey, this is my opinion. I can help you here. Men are there to assist and to help. They’re not leaders. It’s a mutual thing. It’s a reciprocal thing. Men are not leaders because if you notice in ancient tribes, women were head of the household. They planted food. Men went out and hunted.

“I couldn’t live any other way and it’s sad to be so uncomfortable in this country and at dis-ease with the whole situation.”

Diva’s construction of both her private and performative selves challenges both traditional definitions of masculinity as well as homogeneous and patriarchal definitions of national identity. Her philosophy, as articulated in this interview, illuminates the intersections between definitions of masculinity and nationhood. Diva embodies J.E. Jer-Don’s assertion that “the process by which homosexuals are marginalized points to an untenable tension in national identity itself, where the political and cultural energy of the nation are expended to expunge a homosexuality which, according to official rhetoric, does not exist” (25). Various episodes in Diva’s narrative expose the tension she experiences as her liminal subjectivity challenges some patriarchal definitions of Bajan nationalism. Diva is also convinced that the seemingly impenetrable

veneer of Bajan masculinity glosses a deeply sexually ambivalent
male population. Although Diva embraces traditionally feminine
behavior and emulates prototypical female pop icons, she proudly
foregrounds the masculine and intimidating aspects of her
physicality when describing instances where she has had to use
these attributes, particularly her six foot four height, in order to
defend herself against assault. Diva’s David and Goliath-like
confrontations with authority are, however, the most riveting
narratives in her interview. In these moments, the complex literal
and psychological signifying she engages in reveals the strength of
her character as well as the depth of her commitment to her
startling, compelling, and persuasive philosophy. These episodes
also reveal the enormity of the obstacles she faces.

CG- Let’s talk about Barbados and your experiences here.

DA- Barbados, the land of pretense, the land of hypocrisy. That’s what you
want to talk about. To be a woman in Barbados is scary. We have a
land here of people who go by certain rules... certain laws that
have been put in place in the 1870s. Laws that, to me, are not suited
or compatible with the times that we are living in. I’m not saying that
we have to change everything. I don’t believe in that. I believe that
when you see society going in a certain direction and things are
happening negatively that you cannot control and being homosexual,
gay, or whatever you want to call it in this country is like most countries
I guess. It’s a stigma, a stain on your reputation. It is a blemish. People
scorn you. People heckle you and call you all sorts of nasty names.

We all have a spirit. A soul. Our spirits are either masculine or feminine
... our spirits have genders too. That is the nucleus of you being
female or male. But sometimes the physical side is not all there. It’s
like a key fitting into a key hole. Sometimes it doesn’t fit. So there’s a
rubbing in that process. I believe strongly that my soul is female.
Strongly. The way I think, never from a male point. But yet I can see
from both sides. So I see both sides of the coin. I see the male side. I
see the female side. That’s why I have a certain balance. Most of the
Gods that the Indians and things worshipped are ambiguous, bisexual-
looking gods that to them is a completion or to have that dual thing
going on.

CG- What is your experience of transgendered/gay life in Barbados?

DA- I live like this all the time. I get problems, but not a lot of problems.
People get a lot worse than I have. I believe in being true to one’s self
and in representing the truth in a very moralistic and decent fashion.
People will accept me eventually and say, “oh she is not so bad.” But
we live in this closet. I don’t believe in this bisexuality. They say

Gillespie, Carmen R. 2006. “Barbados, the
Land of Pretense...” A Conversation with
Diva Alexander de Beauvoir.” Sargasso,
Caribbean Representations: Reconsidering
Old Myths. 2005-06, 1 (pp. 7-27).
bisexual but they will still do stuff with a man. I say basically hey, I’ve never been attracted to women. Never slept with one. Never had the inclination to go with one. So how do you juggle two sexes at the same time? It must be tremendous. It must be a real burden. I’m not knocking anybody. Everybody has their own thing. I believe that if the laws would allow people to be open, we wouldn’t have a problem with being bisexual, not knowing who’s gay.

CG- Do you jump? [participate in a band in the Cropover carnival]

DA- I used to. I don’t any more.

CG- Why did you stop?

DA- It’s no fun anymore to me. The last year that I jumped, I had five men on me. I could not get away. No. I thought that if they had the chance they would drag me off and do something really mean to me. So I said, “uh, uh. No more for me.” I prefer to watch, and besides, Queen Elizabeth doesn’t jump in a band. I don’t need that. It’s fun to watch and the sweatiness. I can’t deal with that. You get TB that way.

Now I’m going back to our show. When we first started, our ultimate aim was to look feminine. You know the epitome of womanhood. We found that if your lash was hanging, or your wig was twisted, people liked that. Bianca tries to be very perfect. Bianca is an Aries. Bianca likes to be perfect. Me now, I look glam, but if my nail is coming off, I don’t mind. I mean, there are many times that I took my wig off if it was shifted. There’s a little thing that I do now. I ask if there is a wig dresser in the house, a hair stylist. I say, “well honey, do my hair!! And I take the wig off and give it to her.” People like that. We need to stop being so serious about it. Just bring it down a little bit for a laugh. I am a big clown. I love RuPaul. RuPaul to me . . . has a spirit that a lot of drag or transgendered people do not have. I love RuPaul. It is RuPaul who tends to propel me into this whole thing ‘cause I wouldn’t have done it before. I was scared to go out like that. I had always had this feminine thing but I would never go on stage in a dress and perform, but honey once I started, it was making money. Let’s go. But I love RuPaul. I think RuPaul is fabulous and I think RuPaul has done a lot. There are a lot of people who do not like RuPaul in the States I understand. They should say hey, RuPaul has caused a revolution somewhat. So don’t look at it that way. Why hold a grudge? It’s like the gay people here. They grudge each other. Most of them don’t like me because I don’t go out and hang out. I don’t go out and hang out at the bars hahahahaha. Or they say, “You think that you’re so posh.” I know my place. It’s Bajan, but still. What I’m saying is that if I go to a gay club or a gay bar. It’s like,
“She looks real bad.”
“What is that she got on?”
“She with he. Well I had he last week.”

I’m like, “I didn’t come here for this.” So I don’t bother to go with them. They don’t like me. Because they see me on TV they don’t like me. Things that I do they cannot do. And they don’t understand why.

CG- So you think that there are a lot of closeted people in Barbados?

DA- There are some who do it. As you know there is sex tourism. We don’t want to talk about it because we know what people will do for money. The society or the family or you know, that kind of thing. It is very, very rampant. And it’s not acceptable to talk about it. So looking at me is like throwing it in your face. Mind you. I might not get as many men or any men. I found a trend in New York. I go on the sites [web sites] and I’ve seen there is a site called BlackMen.com These are men that look really, really good. The women would go mad. Some of them have women. Some of them don’t. Some of them say they want guys in the gym. They don’t want any fat and I’m like, “what’s going on here?” Nobody wants me. I’ll live a lot longer. [laughs] To work so hard. To lose so many lives. To fight Stonewall just to go back into the closet. It’s like you’re regressing. It’s very sad because in five years time, what are we going to do? It’s sad.

CG- Would you say that there is a gay community here in Barbados?

DA- Of course. We don’t have any gay clubs as such, but there are places where gays hang out. At Ragamuffins [the location of the show] we get more straights. I don’t really go out. I do my job. Go home. That’s me. We have a large gay community. Very large. Then you have the stragglers—the bisexuals. Mostly it’s at private houses. You go to these private parties. It’s a cliché thing. You hear about a party and you would be surprised who is there—ministers, government officials. People go because they want to rub shoulders with somebody. It’s big. It’s big. What else is causing people to be inert in their behavior is Jamaican dub-culture, but yet they have a large gay tourism. They always sing, from as far back as I could remember, about Mama Mash and, what else was there? Shabba Ranks started it Mama Mash and Aunty Man, Batty Boy and this new word “chi chi man” so everything is related to this [dub] and encouraging young people to hate them. And I am saying if you don’t like it, why put in such interest and such energy towards it? If I don’t like something, I’m not going to sing about it. The singing about it is going to be very minimal in my song. So all these guys are on the bandwagon to shoot this body. It stirs up violence and they want to hurt people. It happens here too. It happens here. I
am a person. I can stand up for myself. If it means that I have to kill you before you hurt me then I’m going to do it and I’m very serious, because I’ve had incidents in the past where people tried to hurt me and they were shot. What they are condemning, they go and do the same thing. With a man or with a woman they do it. They do this thing about trunking [having anal sex with] women.

CG- So you see yourself as being honest?

DA- I believe I couldn’t live any other way and it’s sad to be so uncomfortable in this country and at dis-ease with the whole situation. Well I like to be myself all the time. I don’t want to try and pretend and say, “Hey, hey. What going on?” I can’t deal with that. Too much on my brain.

CG- Did you have trouble when you were younger with people trying to threaten you physically?

DA- My childhood was very good. Around seventeen or eighteen, it started to get very stressful. I have people trying to bully me. I was always a tough one. I am one who looks very soft, but when you come to me, I fight you. I don’t give up until I see blood coming. I fought all my life. I used to do martial arts. I use these [indicating her hands], girlfriend. I have no fear. I go into place where people would say. “You went up there?” I don’t care. I have to live my life and I’m not going to let anybody tell me I can’t go here or there. When you go to gas stations and people don’t want to serve you, I kick up a fuss and the nasty side of me comes out. I believe in justice and treating everybody fairly. And when I see that I say, “hey, uh-uh. People losing jobs for that. Hey, I’m going to have your job.” Simple, simple. Most of the time I get people just looking. ‘Cause I’m so calm.

One day this girl said, “I just want to tell you, I consider you so brave. You are so cool. How do you keep so?” I meditate all morning. Whenever I go, wherever I go the father is watching me. Angels are there. I believe in that strongly. Situations where I could have died, I just floated right through them. I had an ordeal this year. This is tantamount to anything that has happened to me so far and in situations like that quotes from the Bible come to you so easily. And I started to recite Psalms 27 and I was released from what happened.

CG- What does it mean to you to be a Bajan?

DA- I have no idea what it is. I don’t feel like a Bajan. When we have our independence, I don’t feel it. I don’t know what it is. I don’t really have that thing. I don’t feel like a Bajan to be honest. I am an international person. I am very global. I think global. I don’t want to say I am a Barbadian. I am this. I am that. I know you Americans say
“God Bless America” and that’s what I’ve found. You Americans are very patriotic. You wear your flag in clothing. It’s not a bad thing. I find it’s very good. You know why? You all have an identity. It’s taught here. When I was in school, we were taught certain things. In terms of fighting for your country no, ‘cause we don’t have that experience. That’s why Americans are so patriotic. When they fight for their country, they come home and they feel good. So I think that’s a part of it. “I’ve been to war.” We don’t have that. I take independence to mean that you are devoid or cut off from certain things. We still have to call on the crown for certain things. The Privy Council. You have this. You have that. There are things that are still legally bound.

There is a case going on. I’m suing the police. Right now. I’m not supposed to talk about it. I went to court. Based on my appearance, on my looks, on my voice, he [the magistrate] found everything with me wrong. He started to question me and I had laryngitis that day and my voice was like a whisper. So he is like, “what is wrong with your voice?” So I said, “pardon me sir, but I’m just talking, but I have laryngitis.” I found out that he was going through the case and I was waiting. So he said, “Were you born with that voice?” I said, “Frankly sir, none of us are born speaking.” The whole courtroom laughed out. He felt bad. He didn’t expect me to say that. Then he said, “Your gender is also determined at birth.” “Sir, what does my gender have to do with this case?” “I see here, you were speeding one hundred miles. Why is this?”

And this went on for five minutes. So then he said well he’s not sure how to address me. “However you choose, I’ll answer.” He said, “all right then. Stand sir.” He read me the thing and asked me how I pleaded. He asked me if I had an attorney. I said, no. The fine was $1000.00 or imprisonment. He said, “anyway, step down.”

The man wanted to send me up to Glendale [the main prison in Barbados] for four days on remand. I had to call a lawyer. I was in a cell for four hours at Central Police Station. Police came and escorted me with gloves on. I was walked across the courtyard. People take my picture. Put me upstairs. Well, they put me by myself. There were criminals next to me, hardened criminals. I was wondering why this was happening to me. All I could do was pray. Pray and trust the Lord to deliver me like Daniel in the lion’s den and I got out with a fine of $500.00. Remember, he said it was $1000.00. I can’t respect this country because of what they’ve done to me. I am not independent. I am not free. So I have no independence here. People never understand that. I’m not free. So I don’t identify with anything that they do. When it comes to independence or waving the flag, I am not a free person. As
far as I'm concerned, I still have shackles on my hands. So until—it can't be any other way.

When it is finished, I am going public. I saw the bitch three weeks ago. He saw me. He almost shit his pants. The way I felt there, I just felt like ... and when he saw me and I walked straight towards him and just swerve off like that. He don't know how I felt about him at that point. I could have done something to him. I know that I would have been incarcerated, but just to satisfy my thing, just fuck him up. It's so easy to be violent. So easy. Let him fall on his own ways. Justice is very important in my book and, I mean, I'm not a lawyer or anything, but in whatever way I can assist or help people to free themselves mentally, I will do it.

I was the investigator [Barbadian tabloid newspaper] cover girl. Years ago, about 1994, I was paid $1000.00 for the cover. All the real girls were paid $100.00 and I got $1000.00. That paper sold out within hours. 'Cause when I went to get one, they were all sold out. Something got to be working for me. I had on a black suit and a wig. I wanted to be as covert a possible. I had a short wig on like Naomi Campbell and I had some blacksome silk and everybody loved it.

I had this reverend, that's a woman, called Lucille Baird. She came up to me in Abed's one day, a store in town: "You shouldn't have done that. You have made God angry." If she could have hit me, she would have hit me that day and I would have floored her. But that same week that I was on the cover, a guy had raped an eight year old and threw her down the well.

I said, "Listen to me. You know nothing about me. You are out of place to be in my face and telling me what I should be doing. Furthermore, you don't know who I am inside and now. I am on the cover of this paper and yet there is a guy who kill and rape a eight year old. What do you have to say about that?" She had nothing to say about that. But she coming at me. What I do will affect me and nobody else but me, so you step off. Mind you, a woman who was with her pointed me out to her. And she came over to me huffing and puffing 'cause she had now been ordained as a priest. I said, "you need to step back or I will slap you down." She don't know. Simple, simple, simple. It was uncalled for.

That's why I don't go to church any more too. I was going to church and I was going to be baptized right on this very beach and the reverend refused to baptize me. Refused. I had confirmation class for eight weeks. He could have told to me that he could not baptize me because, because, because, right? All he kept saying was hair. I had my hair down to here. [indicates waist] I cut it now. It's a big afro. But my hair was like down to here.
He kept saying to cut it and, “it’s a shame for a man to have long hair.” “If that’s the case, why is it you have a big picture of Christ with long hair and a mustache to boot?” He said, “You shouldn’t challenge the Bible.”

I said, “If I can’t challenge it, then I’m not going to be in this church.” ‘Cause I need to challenge things and know why. I can’t just sit down and you tell me why. No way. He wait ‘till we got on the beach. Seven o’clock in the morning. I had the robe in my hand to put on and the man snatched the robe from me. I can’t baptize you. I walked home and I cried like a baby. I walked right up that road and I cried. I get home and I bawl. Bawl like a little child.

My hair was natural. I went straight to Carlton [a supermarket] and bought a relaxer [to straighten hair]. I needed something to bring me back. But when I went home, I sat in my front door and I heard a voice. I hear people saying how they does hear this voice and I was like, that’s bullshit. I hear this voice, so what’s wrong? “I seek your heart not your clothes. I don’t care what you wear.” This voice is telling me this. And I was like, this I — my mind playing upon me. It was God telling me, “Look, I don’t care what you wear. Just make sure that your heart is right. Make sure that you do good to people. You are a shining light and example.” And that’s what I try to be now. I try to be a good example for my kindred who don’t back me who hate me but yet. I had to say to myself, if I wasn’t a strong person I would have killed myself.

I am writing a novel, Glass Houses. That was the first title. I have several titles that I was going through. I’ve got to live a little more, baby. I believe in the future to come you’re going to find a lot more people like me. I’m just like the catalyst of what is to come. I don’t think anybody’s crazy. A lot of people they have in the institutions are not crazy. When they start to take medication, that’s when they go crazy. We all have the capacity to think for ourselves. The mind is a very masterful thing, but is also a very dangerous thing. I’m going to write everything. There is still a lot I have to learn.

The interview with Diva creates a space within which to experience the largely unheard stories that allow for the (re)presentation of subjective experience and for the interruption of the objectification of Caribbean lived experience. Diva’s narrative and other first person accounts of Caribbean life create a threshold through which new ways of understanding history, race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, nationalism, and culture become possible. Through her forthright disclosures, the interview with Diva challenges the homogeneity and unidimensionality of popular constructions of Barbados and the Caribbean by revealing through a subjective and marginalized vantage

point the myriad complexities of contemporary Bajan culture. Diva’s narrative illustrates the necessity of textual interventions in challenging the dominant narratives regarding Caribbean peoples and in (re)placing the act of narrative representation within the control of the people of the Caribbean themselves.