See Me: A Life of Invisibility of the LGBTQIA+ Community in Trinidad & Tobago

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See Me: A Life of Invisibility of the LGBTQIA+ Community in Trinidad & Tobago

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Artist Statement

As my thesis research project, I wanted was research a topic that I am passionate about, so I chose to do a documentary on the LGBTQIA+ community in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. I chose this study because this was personal to me, I was born in Trinidad and Tobago and lived half of my life there. When I became aware of my sexuality, I was 11, and I had to pretend to be heterosexual throughout my teenage years into my adult life. My relationships were very private, and I could not muster the courage in telling the truth to my family and friends. Living in the US for over twenty-two years made it difficult to ignore how privileged and fortunate I am because of the advocacy and legislative changes that protected me. When my friends in Trinidad and I talk there was frequent mention of incidents where members of the community were assaulted or attacked, and where three friends of ours were killed.

Not much had changed since I migrated, I felt compelled to bring about awareness through this documentary because I am still a very involved member of the LGBTQIA+ community. So, hearing these stories of friends of mine and of others experiencing discrimination and exclusion, violence, and in some instances, death, made me very sad. During my many visits, I also felt uncomfortable and fearful because I knew that being gay was not still an accepted lifestyle even though I left over twenty years ago. I used this opportunity to conduct my research via video-recorded in-person interviews in Trinidad and Tobago. Raising awareness regarding the parameters of homophobia and transphobia discrimination the LGBTQIA+ community faced by capturing their stories, and their voices shedding light on their life experiences. They felt invisible, the government did not have legal protection, or policy reform for equity and inclusion. This marginalized population could not enjoy social spaces and was left to make the best of their lives and survive. Their ability to publicly exercise their human rights
depended on the generosity of local NGOs like Pride.TT, Friends For Life events like Gay Pride Parade, and Queen Diva Trans Beauty Pageant. With financial aid and support from countries like the US which supports Arts and Cultural events including the LGBTQIA+ community, and the UK government most recently honoring Trans activist Brandi Rodriguez for her tremendous work with the transgender community.

In preparation for the interviews, I drafted a list of sample interview questions I felt good about. These included: Can you describe for me what your family life was like growing up? When did you become aware of your sexuality/gender identity? When and how much did you share with your family, friends, etc.? Can you describe some of your experiences of being gay when it comes to work, school, and public spaces? Where do you find a sense of community and/or social support? How do you feel when you can socialize with other gay members in public? How much do you make use of the safe spaces and resources that are available? What hopes do you have for the future of the LGBTQIA+ community?

The initial process before arriving in Trinidad finding candidates to interview was challenging, but I had support from my close friend Wayde Ramnarine who is a well-known advocate and member of the LGBTQIA+ community, and friends who helped me put together a list of possible candidates willing to meet with me in person for the interview. Local NGOs such as Pride.TT, Trans Coalition of Trinidad and Tobago, LAMBDA, and the Family Planning Association of Trinidad and Tobago (FPATT). After roughly three weeks of sourcing potential candidates, the response was great, people were excited about this project (me included), and we had compiled a list of about forty-five names and five NGO representatives that were willing to be interviewed.
Once I started the process of finalizing my list of participants, I was disappointed when faced with the possibility of about half of my list changing their minds. This resulted out of fear of being seen as some was not publicly out, fear of the backlash consequences of family, friends, and people who knew them, and of being publicly targeted. This just solidified and demonstrated how fearful and emotionally affected they were. Any consequences resulting in their appearance and affiliation with this documentary regardless of the potential awareness of the plight the LGBTQIA+ community faced they still did not want to share their stories. Respectful of their wishes, the final list of nineteen total was made: five NGOs and fourteen interviewees. Interviews started in January, at the W Gallery of Modern Art for two weeks. The W gallery was made available to use because it was well-known to the LGBTQIA+ community where participants would be comfortable because it was a known safe space and meant a lot to the broader community showcasing local artists and welcoming to all.

Ensuring that I provided a safe environment and privacy during their interview for all participants was paramount because I wanted to ensure their safety and build their trust. They did not know me, and aside from the fact that they were willing to put themselves at risk to tell their stories showed me just how important this research was to my community and how much they needed and wanted a chance to be heard. I did this by setting up the interviews by giving each participant specific times and dates to ensure privacy and a safe space for all. The day of the interview, I was introduced by Wayde whom they spoke with to set up the interview, we sat down for a few minutes to talk about the interview process, get to know one another, and address any concerns or questions they may have had, and when they were ready, we proceeded. Accommodations were also made for two in-house visits which were needed due to mobility issues, a trans couple who wanted to be interviewed together, and transportation was requested
and provided for four of the fourteen individuals to be interviewed because they were fearful of traveling alone.

After reflecting on my research, I concluded that fear was the main concern. They spoke about while going about their daily lives out in public, they continued to be in fear for their safety as LGBTQIA+ persons, and that the transgender and homosexual community were at a higher risk. Instances, whereby transgender and homosexual individuals dressed and presented themselves, caused unwanted attention when out in public spaces. Other problems they experienced were limited employment opportunities and a high risk of being displaced from their family homes if they were to come out to them. There is also the family and social pressure to publicly present themselves as more masculine if they were born male, and more feminine if they were born female to not embarrass their family. Regarding the trans community, they expressed the need mainly for more health services including mental health providers. They felt that they were treated with more hostile aggressiveness by society and organizations as a response to their sexual preference and gender identity more so than gay women.

General opinions that the government of Trinidad and Tobago has been reluctant on enacting legislative reform towards including LGBTQIA+ rights. The hope for change they are eagerly awaiting would probably not happen anytime soon, and little to no police protection when out in public or reporting a crime.

**Conclusion**

The progress of social acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community is slowly moving forward but not fast enough especially when there are still serious concerns surrounding fear. Societal and organizational discord aligned with traditional cultural mores and values,
victimization, discrimination, and injustice regarding the current human rights issues is a disconnect from what is misconstrued and miscommunicated. The Trinidad and Tobago government and its citizens who may not know or think much about gender identity or sexuality, or the humanity of others different from themselves may seem unsympathetic.

Countries like Trinidad and Tobago where social injustice exists should be encouraged to change. The social stigma in shifting the paradigm on LGBTQIA+ culture and lifestyles needs to put more focus on the community. How they see themselves as a community, their values, and a stronger communal presence in supporting allies and advocacy groups. Hope for the future that there will be legislative progress to introduce anti-discrimination legislation that will protect their civil liberties and freedom, be inclusive and equitable, equal opportunity employment, and create more public safe spaces.

Through this experience in doing my research and the making of this documentary, I have gained allies and built friendships. Building our LGBTQIA+ community through aligning with groups/partners and networking, I look forward to continuing advocacy work with local partners, championing positive changes in the legislative processes, social equity, and inclusion in Trinidad and Tobago. This summer, I plan to take some time off and will be part of the planning committee organizing the second pride parade during pride month celebrated in July. I am very proud that I have done my original research, and I hope that I have brought to you the life of invisibility through the lens of these personal truths and that you see them as I see them.

**Documentary**

[See Me: A Life of Invisibility of the LGBTQIA+ Community in Trinidad & Tobago](#)
Acknowledgments

I want to thank Professor Moore and the Filmmakers’ Association at BSU for helping me with the biggest challenges in putting this documentary together, helping me do the cut, edit, and production, and time stamping what materials were to be used. These hard cuts in the video allowed us to design the montage effect and to also create the narrative corresponding with the responses frame by frame.

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To my family, I love you all.