



A documentary film by Tracy Assing

# The Amerindians

A documentary by Tracy Assing

2010, 40 min

Shooting format: HDV PAL

Aspect Ratio: 1.78 (16 x 9 Video)

Screening formats available: DVD Video (NTSC)

## SHORT SYNOPSIS

In this revealing documentary Tracy Assing explores Trinidad's indigenous history and the inner workings of the organization which represents these indigenous descendants - The Santa Rosa Carib Community, the only recognized group representing indigenous descendants in Trinidad and Tobago. Until now, Amerindian descendants have depended on the stories of their grandparents and great-grandparents for their history, while the indigenous story of survival has been written out of the history books. Assing walks us through her own exploration of the history of the Santa Rosa Community and, as her great aunt, the Carib Queen, prepares to join the Great Spirit, ponders an uncertain future.

## LONG SYNOPSIS

"The only real Caribs are dead Caribs." In this revealing documentary, filmmaker Tracy Assing seeks to put to rest that myth.

In *The Amerindians*, Assing explores her indigenous identity as well as the politics and belief system of the Santa Rosa Carib Community in Arima, Trinidad. Assing was raised a member of the Santa Rosa Carib Community, the only recognized group representing indigenous descendants in Trinidad and Tobago. Until now, Amerindian descendants have depended on the stories of their grandparents and great-grandparents for their history, while the indigenous story of survival has been written out of the history books.

Every year the Carib community celebrates the Santa Rosa Festival, and the Carib Queen Valentina Medina leads the procession to the Santa Rosa Parish. The community may soon have to find a new Queen as Queen Valentina Medina prepares to join the Great Spirit. The search for a new Carib Queen raises questions about the community's future. What does it mean to be the Carib Queen? What does it mean to be a Carib in Trinidad?

## SCREENINGS

- Trinidad and Tobago Film Festival
- University of the West Indies, St Augustine, Trinidad
- University of Trinidad and Tobago, National Academy of Performance Arts, Port of Spain, Trinidad
- Peter Doig's Studio Film Club, Angostura Complex, Laventille, Trinidad



## The Amerindians

by Tracy Assing

**Third World Newsreel**

**545 8th Ave., 10th Fl, New York, NY 10018**

**(212) 947-9277 ext. 17, [distribution@twm.org](mailto:distribution@twm.org), [www.twm.org](http://www.twm.org)**



## BIO

Tracy Assing is a writer, photographer, filmmaker based in Trinidad. Her work on indigenous culture has been published in the Caribbean Review of Books and Caribbean Beat magazine. She has also served as a contributing editor to Caribbean Beat and as editor of Discover Trinidad and Tobago and Energy Caribbean. She is currently Contributing Editor for ARC (Art. Recognition.Culture). Her first documentary film *The Amerindians* premiered at the Trinidad and Tobago Film Festival in 2010. The film is Assing's personal essay on exploring her identity as a member of Trinidad's indigenous community. Her research interests lie primarily in pre-Columbian history, encompassing archaeology, anthropology, culture, religion and botany.

## CREDITS

Written/Produced/Directed/Presented – Tracy Assing

With the support of:

The National Museum

The National Trust through the Amerindian Project Committee

The Trinidad and Tobago Film Company  
BP



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# CRB

The Caribbean Review of Books

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## The return of the native

By Dylan Kerrigan

**The Amerindians**, directed by Tracy Assing and Sophie Meyer  
(40 minutes)



*Still from The Amerindians. Image courtesy the trinidad+tobago film festival*

Historians tell stories of the past. These stories are always partial truths. These partial truths have consequences for how we imagine the present and the future. In this excellent documentary account of the contemporary Amerindian population of Trinidad and Tobago, and the issues the community faces, directors Tracy Assing and Sophie Meyer clearly illustrate this connection between past, present, and future. Amerindian identity, we are reminded, is not and nor should it be solely or principally about public events like the Santa Rosa Festival. There is far more to the story.

Assing was raised a member of the Santa Rosa Carib Community, based in Arima in east Trinidad. It is hard to put a figure on the size of this community, not least because the government of Trinidad and Tobago has no legal definition of the term “indigenous peoples,” nor does the country’s census ask questions about Amerindian ancestry. Within the community, some say the figure is around five hundred people, out of a national population of 1.3 million.

Yet in the existence of numerous Amerindian place names and words in everyday parlance, in cultural practices like hammocks, animal masquerades, and medicinal knowledge attributed to localised Amerindian forms, and in the fact that the settlement sites of many of Trinidad’s present day towns and many crops cultivated today had their origins in the pre-Columbian period, you can make an argument that Amerindian influences are everywhere in our local culture. For Assing, the common, simplistic, and erroneous tales told by earlier historians of the islands, of two local groups encountered by Columbus when he stumbled upon Iere in 1498 — the “Caribs” (war-like cannibals) and “Arawaks” (peace-loving farmers) — and the subsequent complete annihilation of the First Peoples, is a form of erasure and historical misrepresentation. The consequences of this misrepresentation, she suggests, can be overcome by “re-becoming” native.

*The Amerindians* offers an intimate, personal narrative about the dilemmas of such a re-becoming. Most specifically, it asks if this is a change the whole community wants, and who has the power to make the choices that have to be faced. Assing — whose great-aunt is the current Carib Queen, a symbolic figurehead — is a young and thoughtful member of the community. She uses the annual Santa Rosa Festival — the prime institution and cultural symbol of the Amerindians as they are represented in Trinidad and Tobago today — as a way into the community. The festival — celebrated since the late eighteenth century, when Trinidad was a Spanish colony, and centred on a Roman Catholic ceremony — has different

meanings for different members; it divides as well as unites.

There is a general agreement that the Santa Rosa Festival probably saved the Carib community. It gave the community, whose history and identity were once recorded and passed on solely in oral form, something solid to hold on to, in the face of forced cultural assimilation. *The Amerindians* also suggests, however, that the Santa Rosa Festival narrative of identity disconnects the First Peoples from their roots, and ties them into a version of events told by the Roman Catholic colonial power.

On one side of the debate we meet medicine man Cristo Adonis and the local parish priest of Santa Rosa, Monsignor Christian Pereira, who both recognise the festival as a form of myth-making. On the other side, we meet self-appointed chief Ricardo Bharath-Hernandez, whose seemingly well-intentioned attempts at re-engineering indigenosity into the island's history do little to instill faith in historical accuracy — not least because his desire for state patronage involves scant consultation with those in the community he represents.

From the opening shot of Assing, her back to the camera, crouched on the edge of a green pool in the forest, which slowly fades into the image of Christ on the cross, the film smartly switches the viewer from one side of the debate to the other. This is a consistent device throughout, a visual reminder of the different conceptions of what it means to be Amerindian in Trinidad and Tobago today. The forest and the Roman Catholic church are visual symbols and also characters that play central roles in the film.

Assing's narrative device of competing voices, and her sensible concern about why — in the face of new research — what is known about the local First Peoples has not been updated within the community's own cultural centre, set up a tension between the commodification of one cultural representation and those voices who clearly articulate that “there is more to us than the Catholic festival.” *The Amerindians* provides insights that should be included in any discussion of the island's First Peoples and their descendents: about issues of accountability; about the connections between identity and politics; about who has the power to represent a group, and who should be included in the politics of representation; and about the forest as a form of education and core element of Amerindian identity. The legend that Caribs “ate people” is recast as a type of ancestral worship, and the collecting of the bones of those who have died as a way to communicate with them in the afterlife — a way of keeping them alive. Assing laments the erosion of such knowledge, and its replacement by a missionary narrative of cannibalism and complete annihilation. She feels this is an analogy for more than lost traditions: it is a statement about the contemporary difficulties of connecting to a past that has been rewritten.

*The Amerindians* is Assing's directorial debut. It promises a bright future. That said, there are weak elements. The film is too short — at forty minutes, it feels almost incomplete, ready to be extended. Another problem is the filmmakers' reluctance to fully explore the contentious issue of state patronage and accompanying financial support. In one scene, when the chief declines to discuss a consultation report he is submitting to the government on the future of the community, until after it has been approved and funded, the viewer is left wanting to know more about his evasiveness. The incident stands out even more when we later learn the position of chief is a construction of the Catholic church, and a form of patriarchy that has sidelined the traditional institution of matriarchy and the role of the Carib Queen. Alongside the chief's telling use of the pronoun “they” to describe Amerindians of the past — rather than the inclusive “we” — it reminds us that the power relations of colonialism never died, they were transformed.

The film's tagline is “the only true Carib is a dead Carib.” By its conclusion, it is clear the reality is quite different. The indigenous people of Trinidad and Tobago and their culture are alive and well — and not just at the Santa Rosa Festival. But *The Amerindians* also illustrates how dominant conceptions of the past silence other versions. And to counter the silence that many contemporary descendents of Trinidad and Tobago's First Peoples experience about their heritage and identity requires a deliberate “re-becoming.”

This rediscovery, however, is not just about resetting the historical record. It is an endeavour connected to the future social and economic development of the islands of Trinidad and Tobago, because the identity of the First Peoples is about more than cultural festivals and remembrance. It is also fundamentally about a connection to the land, a land today scarred by refuse, badly planned development, and disconnection from its current modern inhabitants — us. Re-becoming native, then is not just for those with a direct bloodline to the First Peoples. It is an indigenous identity trait for everyone in Trinidad and Tobago, a prompt to reconsider our guardianship of and relationship to the land.

In the film's final scene, we return to the forest. Assing now faces us, telling us about her understanding of the lessons the forest has taught her community. The last shot gently zooms out. Assing, her back to us once again, stands for a brief moment looking up at the canopy. With shards of sunlight breaking through the trees, we come to see what has been

erased from plain sight for many of us in Trinidad and Tobago. The forest is and has always been a cathedral. It was the first religion of the island. It still is. We need to recognise that.

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This review is part of a special section on recent Caribbean film, supported by the [trinidad+tobago film festival 2010](#)

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[\*The Caribbean Review of Books, September 2010\*](#)

**Dylan Kerrigan** is an anthropologist, currently based at the University of the West Indies, St Augustine. His recent research looks at the relationship between the accumulation of capital and the shifting construction of difference in nineteenth- and twentieth-century urban Trinidad.

# Filmmaker Tracy Assing: Inspired by the Amerindians

Published: Sun, 2011-07-03 22:05

[Michelle Loubon](#)



Carib descendant/filmmaker Tracy Assing produced *The Amerindians*. Photos: Dilip Singh

Clutching tiny woven cane baskets filled with red and pink flowers, Carib descendant Tracy Kim Assing joined the Santa Rosa parade, through the Borough of Arima. She dropped delicate hibiscus and rose blossoms for her late aunt, Carib queen Valentina Medina to trod upon. The Santa Rosa Carib Community is the last remaining organised group of people identifying with an Amerindian identity and way of life. At Arima Government Secondary School, she learned Caribs and Arawaks had been decimated by los conquistadores who came in search of El Dorado. At eight, she had made a concrete decision to stop participating in the festival. During her stint as Assistant Editor *Caribbean Beat*, she documented it in an essay *The Long Walk Home* (July/August 2005).

Assing said: “Even at that age I realised that the story of its origin might have been only as real as the tales that captured my imagination in the books of Enid Blyton. Questions about my heritage would only multiply as I grew older, and I found there were many instances of written history contradicting the things I’d come to believe as life-practices.” True to form, Assing kept pondering about her ancestors and First Nation Peoples. She took it upon herself to create a film—*The Amerindians*—which sought to address some of these burning questions. Assing, a former *Guardian* feature writer, relied upon her journalistic skills and natural curiosity. Assing, 36, shared her inspiration for *The Amerindians*. She realised she had to tell the story of her people for posterity. Assing said: “The media do not recognise us much. Except for the Day of Recognition (October) and the Santa Rosa Festival (August). In the 70s and 80s, there were fairly regular stories about what we were doing.”

Assing added: “The film started with questions. I grew up in the Carib Community. I went to school at Arima Secondary. I was taught the Caribs and Arawaks had been decimated. But I was still alive. I was of Carib ancestry. I wondered whether we did eat people. Do we eat people? I would ask my parents...I thought I would ask my priest (Fr Christian Perreira).” She lamented the Carib community was facing a sense of erosion. Assing added: “Where was the sense of identity...the sense somebody could apply. Young people started to distance themselves from ‘what it is to be Carib’. The word Carib

became commercialised. A beer is a Carib." Questions assailed her. "They may not have been Carib or any tribe called Carib. There were a number of tribes. People were put into missions." Miscegenation had taken place within the Carib community, too. As she embarked upon the odyssey, Assing had tete-a-tete with archaeologist Dr Basil Reid, eminent historian Prof Bridget Brereton and her late great aunt Carib queen Valentina Medina.

### **Kudos to Askia Amon-Ra**

When *The Amerindians* premiered at the 2010 Film Festival, Assing dedicated it to her former History teacher Askia Amon-Ra at Arima Secondary School. He had built a formidable reputation as a teacher who got full CXC History passes and encouraged his students to love history. Assing has read for History at CXC level, but she did not read for a degree. Yet the lack of tertiary education did not hinder her from creating *The Amerindians*. "I dedicated the film to Askia Amon-Ra. He was responsible for instilling that search of identity. "It is one of the reasons I dedicated the film to him. He encouraged us not to just accept what was written but to seek the truth."

### **Challenging questions**

As she continued to unearth the truths, Assing said: "I did get a lot of answers. In the interviews, people were honest academics. They were excited about my questions." While Assing was reluctant to let the cat out of the bag completely, she noted the film explored questions related to the Santa Rosa Festival and Amerindian life in an era gone by. She asked: "Did they find a statue in the forest?" Fr Perreira gave an interesting answer. She turned to her aunt Valentina Medina, fondly known as Aunty Mavis. "What makes a queen?" she asked. She even remembered the stories her grandfather, the late John Assing had told her. Assing said: "I talked to them about their childhood. How did they know they were indigenous? They said "they just knew they were indigenous." They set their story in Caura and Paria and working on the cocoa plantations. Great Caura was peopled by a tribe from Venezuela." Assing added: "Indigenous people sailed down the Coora River in Venezuela and settled in Caura. They fashioned their bows and arrows to catch fish. They used the spokes of bicycle wheels to make spears. They used a lot of bush medicine." As the storyline unfolded, Assing said: "I became aware of my heritage."

### **The Amerindians document**

Assing paid kudos to Carla Foderingham and the Trinidad and Tobago Film Company for their input into *The Amerindians*. She said: "It has the distinction of being one of the few films chosen by every film station." Assing's ace effort didn't go unnoticed. Guardian's editorial (May 2) saluted Assing's efforts. An excerpt said: "The young filmmaker created an important document in the narrative of the First People of Trinidad and Tobago, whose history lives on largely in the stories passed on from generation to generation, undocumented by the many conquerors who came to this island. It added: "The formation of the Carib Santa Rosa Community in 1974 has been an effort at not just staking a claim on that kind of memory, but an attempt at knitting the stories of the region into a larger history and cultural archive as that organisation has reached out to surviving Amerindian tribes in the region." While saluting her efforts, the editorial warned time was against them. It said: "Gathering these stories and rebuilding the rich, natural narrative of the lifestyles and history of the first inhabitants of Trinidad and Tobago is the only way to provide a real alternative to the readily consumed temptations available in the attractively packaged fictions of foreign entertainment. These are not simple matters, and time is against the elders of the Carib community. Encouraging and supporting efforts of local documentarians to preserve the history and traditions of the oldest elements of our history in modern media should be the first point of intervention by the Ministry of Arts and Multiculturalism (led by Winston Peters) in advancing the future of the local Carib community."

### **Amerindians in T&T**

Amerindian peoples have existed in Trinidad for as long as 6,000 years before the arrival of Columbus, and numbered at least 40,000 at the time of Spanish settlement in 1592. All of Trinidad was populated by several tribes, Trinidad being a transit point in the Caribbean network of Amerindian trade and exchange. Amerindian tribes were referred to by various names: Yaio, Nepuyo, Chaima, Warao, Kalipuna, Carinepogoto, Garini, Aruaca. Amerindian words and place names survive into the present: the Caroni and Oropouche rivers; the Tamana and Aripo mountains; places such as Arima, Paria, Arouca, Caura, Tunapuna, Tacarigua, Couva, Mucurapo, Chaguanas, Carapichaima, Guaico, Mayaro, Guayaguayare. Trinidad's Amerindians formed part of large regional island-to-island and island-to-mainland trading networks; the Warao of Venezuela, who still exist, were frequent visitors until only recent times.

The Amerindians developed the canoe, the bow and arrow, and the ajoupa. Amerindian cuisine is enjoyed by many Trinidadians: Cassava bread and Farine; Warap; barbecued wild game; corn pastelles; coffee; cocoa; chadon beni. The Amerindians also gave Trinidad and Tobago its first major rebellion in the name of freedom: the Arena uprising of 1699. In 1783 Trinidad's Amerindians were displaced from their lands to make way for the influx of French planters and their African slaves. In 1759 the Mission of Arima was formed, consolidated and enlarged in 1785, and the Amerindians were



to have had control of 2,000 acres of land. A number of tribes were pressed into Arima, mostly Nepuyo, and generically referred to as either “Caribe” or “Indio”—Arima was the last Mission Town.

Parang, utilising both Spanish and Amerindian musical instruments, emerged from the evangelisation of the Amerindians. The Caribs in Arima, converted to Catholicism, were led by a Titular Queen.

The histories of major towns such as Arima and Siparia, two large former Amerindian Mission Towns, have given us Trinidad’s two oldest festivals: The Santa Rosa Festival of Arima, and La Divina Pastora in Siparia. At least 12,000 people in Northeast Trinidad are of Amerindian descent. (Taken from the Santa Rosa Carib Community Web site)

### **About the filmmaker**

Assing has been invited to speak at the University of Toronto, Canada. Assing, who was Editor of Discover T&T for three years, is currently considering taking it to the US and Caribbean. She is also considering a sequel *The Herbalist*. Assing said: “If young people took to the medium of film, they would spend less time viewing and filming violence. Less time with porn. They would check out ‘Where do umbrellas come from? Why does granny drink vervine tea?’ “The country is full of rich stories. Exploring stories on film is a means of documenting culture. Culture is everything.” Assing is signing a distribution deal with a New York-based company, Third World News Reel—which specialises in educational films. It can be viewed on Facebook and some videos can be seen on Assing’s site, [TriniWildIndian](#).

This is a printer-friendly version of a page from the **Caribbean Beat** website. The fully formatted version of this page is located at: [http://www.meppublishers.com/online/caribbean-beat/past\\_issues/index.php?pid=2000&id=cb107-2-72](http://www.meppublishers.com/online/caribbean-beat/past_issues/index.php?pid=2000&id=cb107-2-72).

[Issue No. 107 - January/February 2011](#)

## THROUGH CARIB EYES

by James Fuller

**The first peoples of the region were written out of history by European colonisers. Now a new documentary by a member of Trinidad's indigenous Amerindian community is reclaiming their place. James Fuller talked to filmmaker Tracy Assing**

"Our ancestors have been written out of history," says Tracy Assing, writer and director of *The Amerindians* and herself a descendant of the indigenous people who inhabited Trinidad & Tobago when it was colonised by Spain in the 16th century. "'The only real Caribs are dead Caribs.' Some people believe that, they believe there are no true Caribs any more."



[Filmmaker Tracy Assing in a scene from the film](#)  
*Still from the film courtesy Tracy Assing*

Amerindian history and culture have long been subverted in the Caribbean, whether deliberately or not, but this new documentary by a first-time director is looking to redress the balance.

Assing, who is a former contributing editor to *Caribbean Beat*, wrote and directed the 40-minute documentary. She also became its reluctant star when the decision was made, late in the production schedule, to focus the story on her. The film is all the more effective for taking the personal story to illustrate and evoke the larger one. Assing takes the viewer through her upbringing and into adulthood, all the time wrangling with the question of what it means to be a person of indigenous descent in today's Trinidad & Tobago.

"It really resonates with people because they feel they're on the journey with me," she says.

The story centres on Arima, in east Trinidad, which owes its very existence to Spanish attempts to absorb and align the native population, an estimated 40,000 strong in 1592. The town was founded by Capuchin monks as a mission to convert the native population to Christianity. That remit was enlarged when, in the 1780s, Spanish Governor Don Jose Maria Chacon brought together all the converted Amerindians, first referred to as Indios and then as Caribs, from across the country to Arima. The town is still regarded as the nation's seat of Amerindian culture and it supports the only organised indigenous community in Trinidad, the Santa Rosa Carib Community. This community consists of around 400 people, identified on the basis of lineage and residence, and a Council of Elders headed by the Carib Queen, at present Assing's great-aunt Valentina Medina, and the President/Chief, Ricardo Hernandez Bharath.

Arima is also the site of the event with which most people now identify indigenous culture, the Santa Rosa Festival, in honour of the first native American saint. That event, held on the last weekend in August, is a Catholic one – a fact that Assing grappled with when she was growing up. What did it really mean to her as an Amerindian to be a good Catholic? Assing's questioning nature and desire to understand are central to the film.

For Assing there is more to being of indigenous descent than the Santa Rosa Festival. For her, the strength of her connection to the environment is the most powerful element. Brought up on the banks of the Arima River, she was first taken into the forest by her father, aged four, and a knowledge of, and respect for, the environment was instilled in her. This knowledge includes traditional herbal medicines, as depicted in the film through conversations with medicine man Christo Adonis. The relationship with her surroundings is a spiritual one.

"I go to the forest and look for guidance and answers. Here I feel most connected with the universe and my family. We have family history that places us here very early on, but if it is that you want to claim this indigeneity, you have to take on the responsibility that comes with your connection to the land.

"Essentially, though, I'm also talking to Trinidad & Tobago. We need to reconnect with where we're from. That's no different whether you're indigenous-identified or not."

Assing says the film has sparked numerous responses.

"It has opened up questions and comments from people of all age groups. Topics range from the need for more local content on TV to sensitivity about global warming and care for the environment, to greater protection of our Northern Range, water conservation, the need for more research into the first Caribbean people, archaeological and anthropological – across the board.

"UWI [the University of the West Indies] has asked me to make a DVD available as a resource for use in a number of faculties such as history, archaeology, anthropology and gender studies. Individuals want to buy DVDs; schools want me to come and talk; the National

Museum is putting a programme together to have the screen filmed twice a week. And I have been invited to screen the film and talk at a university in New York."

The story was always waiting to be told, but it was waiting for someone with sufficient passion to take up the challenge. Getting that story straight, or at the very least taking a more rigorous investigative approach to it, has real-life ramifications.

"It's your identity; it's where you come from; it's pride in who you are.

"The film has been a journey of reconnection for me, but whilst my story is personal, my fight shouldn't be a personal one. This is something that anyone who is interested in the history of this region should have an interest in," says Assing.

The history of the Amerindians is clearly not dead; indeed, it is alive in all those who carry that blood to this day. One such young woman is aiming to help set straight the misinformation and misunderstanding carried down through the ages. The Amerindians, launched at the 2010 Trinidad & Tobago Film Festival, is an important part of that process, but Assing sees it as the start of something rather than the end.

"I'm ecstatic at the reaction to the film. It was what I wanted to do, to generate discussion and get people thinking about this. It will be very exciting to see how things develop from here."



[Assing's great-aunts, Elsa \(left\) and Valentina \(the Carib Queen\) at the Santa Rosa Festival](#)  
*Tracy Assing*

### **Convenient colonial history**

Interwoven with the film is a potted history of the Amerindians in the islands: how they originated from the Amazonian and Orinoco deltas and how around eight tribes were known to have travelled up and down and inhabited the Caribbean chain from as long as 7,000 years ago. Traditionally, Caribbean children have been taught that there were just two tribes when Columbus arrived in 1498 – the peaceful Arawaks and the warlike Caribs – and that they were decimated by the Spanish invaders when permanent settlement began in 1592.

This is the convenient history of colonialism: that the indigenous peoples were wiped out and that their culture barely affected what followed – ergo, history starts with Columbus. It is nonsense, of course, but has maintained its stubborn acceptance through a lack of rigorous research and an educational lethargy which have seen few challenging the established version.

This is one of the principal reasons Assing embarked on the project, which took two years to complete.

[return to top](#)