

On Becoming an Indian Starboy

Given my own coordinates, transnationalism seems to have been bred in the marrow. It and various forms of queerness swing hand in hand. The stories I write, the art I make all speak of the desire to break and simultaneously to braid given identities, to make transformative leaps into, as optimistic as this may be, a self-defined “other.” But if this breaking and braiding of identity is a sword, it is not mine only—it is, I believe, the way of the Trinidadian living abroad.

For Indians crossing the Kala Pani to work as indentured labourers on the sugar cane estates of the Caribbean where slavery of African peoples had just been abolished—1834 and onwards—an opportunity existed to reinvent themselves in new landscapes where their histories were unknown, where caste, for instance, could be shed or, for the enterprising and daring, changed. When prospective Indian labourers just off the boats from India were asked by the British officers at the port of entry in Port of Spain, the capital city of Trinidad, what their names were, many hadn’t understood the question and had answered with the name of the place in India from which they had come, and others, indeed understanding the question, decided, why not?—in a new land they might as well become whatsoever and who-soever they fancied, and in clever moves gave answers like Maharajah and Rajkumar, and these words became their surnames. I suspect that once an Indian from India stepped foot on one of those boats in the nineteenth century, bound for the islands of the British Empire, in leaving behind language, family ties, community, the village, tradition in general, very specific religious rites, he or she was transitioning into a queerness of no return. Those of us

in more recent times, responding to a restlessness no doubt provoked by that earlier rupture, have migrated elsewhere yet again. And, now, far from Trinidad, we continue to invent entirely new ways of being. Yet by dint of the original displacement, we seem destined to limp along in a limbo of continuously changing and challenging queerness. It is the how and the why of the stories that are written.

Contrary to the official narratives in history books on the origins of Indians in Trinidad and Tobago, my family's account was that our ancestors had not worked as indentured labourers as had the ancestors of other Indo-Trinidadians who had arrived during the same period. Knowing that the stigma of being the descendant of cane field labourers still sting many, and curious about how stories of origin are massaged, I have spent years asking for clarification.

My grandmother's sister, in her early nineties, was fully *compos mentis* when, fortified by a glass of brandy and an eager listener with a notebook and a pen in hand, she spun, or rather related, the following story. In good Indo-Trinidadian fashion, it involves a pumpkin vine of family relations, a lost inheritance, troubled love, a get-away boat, and a gun.

My grandmother's grandfather was a pundit who, for an unknown reason, was interested in making the journey from Calcutta to Trinidad in the late 1800s. As part of my great-great-grandfather's contract of travel to that island, he did indeed work as an indentured labourer in the sugar cane fields. But it had been quickly revealed, not a month after his arrival in Trinidad, that he was a pundit and he was consequently immediately relieved of his labourer duties and pressed into service as a pundit for the community of Indians on the estate he had been assigned to. Apparently, a month of indentured labour does not necessarily an indentured labourer make.

Bulaki Pandit, this great-great-grandfather of mine, performed religious duties for people who often paid him in kind, for example with vegetables grown on the meagre plots around the barracks in which they were housed. His wife, my great-great-grandmother, apparently set up a roadside table on which she sold the excess gifts. If this reminds you of Ganesh and his wife Leela in V.S. Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur*, it is not a coincidence. Stories come from somewhere. With savings from this enterprise, that great-great-grandmother was in time able to purchase a pair of cows. From the sale of cow's milk, she saved enough money to have a shed built, a shed with a window, and a door that could be locked. This shed replaced her roadside table. Soon enough, her sons were involved in this little shopkeeping business.

More milk cows were bought, and eventually, in a particularly creative jump, one car, a Ford with the license plate number H24 was acquired, and a man was hired to run the car from a town named Tuna Puna to Port of Spain and back. It was the beginning of a little early twentieth-century Trinidadian-style empire that would, in no time at all, include the first bus service company on the island, orange estates, and a full-fledged dairy farm.

One of Pandit's sons, Sookdeo Misir, married a poor girl who came from Nepal. Perhaps it was because Sookdeo had been brought up by an enterprising mother that he had the foresight to imagine a formal education for the girls within his family.

But before his daughter Basdevi, later to be my grandmother, could finish high school at St. Joseph's Convent in Port of Spain, she eloped, to the utter horror of the other students, the nuns, and, naturally, worst of all, her family. She ran off with a man from a different class background, a taxi driver, and although he was of Indian origin his family had come not from the north like themselves but from the south of India, from Madras, and *his family* had indeed worked in the cane-fields as labourers. For some reason that grandfather's entire family, including his mother, my *aji*, who never spoke any English, had all converted, not long after their arrival on the island, rather queerly, from Hinduism to Catholicism. With this elopement, Grandma was disowned from her family, cut off from the inheritance of a massive wealth that she would watch her cousins enjoy in later life.

And, ah, there was indeed a gun. Apparently it was aimed and waved (and in Indian movie-style I imagine it to have been fired . . . several times, the shots still resounding half a century and more later) in the raised hand of my grandmother's father's brother, as he stood helpless on the wharf screaming at Carl Mootoo who, having just eloped with Basdevi Misir, was taking off with her on their honeymoon in a little . . . here it comes . . . or goes . . . put-put boat headed for "down the islands," Basdevi's head covered in a scarf, wearing that and sunglasses to hide her identity, the silver of the sea and the sky glancing off her glasses and off the gun. (The scarf, shades, and shots are the details that make a story; the rest is cross-my-heart truth.)

It was only in her golden years that that same eloping, class- and religion-hopping grandmother's interest in all things Indian and Hindu bloomed, and it did so, then, beyond control. I would have been in my early teens then. At the time Trinidad was in the throes of the Black Power movement, and the land throbbed with the fever of a nationalism that was for the first time being defined geographically and locally. In the midst of such chaos, Grandma, in

an act of her own personal anarchy, insisted that we, her grandchildren, learn to speak Hindi, read and write Sanskrit, attend poojas, sing bhajans, and read the Bhagawat Gita. She insisted that my sister and I (we were then oblivious to her school-skipping, eloping ways) be good Indian girls, a phrase we heard endlessly in those days.

But her admonishments were taking place in a house and in a Trinidad that was no longer simply throbbing but rather exploding, often violently, with the desire for an independence that went beyond that on paper, an independence felt in the fabric of daily life, from the most important issues of equal opportunities among the races in the job place and in government, to issues of the heart.

Just before I entered my teens, my father, the son of that grandmother, announced himself to be an agnostic, and became a politician. In the country there was a sense that the days of the British strategy of divide and rule that had led to conflicts and barbed wire divisions between the various displaced and colonized peoples, between their races, religions, and countries of origin, had to be transcended. We weren't sure what would replace this mess or even if anything could, but it was a project, begun even before independence of 1962, and one that continues, still messily, to this date.

It is interesting that what was seen to be Trinidadian in those days was all that was related to black culture, to the culture of those of African origin, and to aspects of French creole and Catholic life—that is, the steel pan, carnival, calypso. What was of Indian origin remained in the minds of others as foreign, mysterious, inexplicable, dark, and would only in the last two decades or so, seep into the Trinidad consciousness as no longer of a mythical place called India, but as a uniquely Trinidadian hybridization.

At age sixteen, living in such a turbulence, I dreamed of knowing all that was forbidden by my Indian-centred and disapproving grandmother: I wanted to belong to the tinkling of the backyard steel pan; to know on Carnival Tuesday the sweat on the faces and skin of masqueraders as their bodies paraded loose down the streets, to belong to the beat of their shuffle, weary by the end of the day, but relentless in a ritual that was to my mind a testament and pledge to citizenship, to the albeit idealistic unity and equality of the races, and to independence. It was the passion to be a participant in the dreaming up of, the designing and construction of a carnival costume, to be visited on Carnival Tuesday by a “robber character” and to be the recipient of his poetry and theatre. I remember the short walk on Ash Wednesday morning from the car where the chauffeur dropped me and my sister off, to

the entrance of my school gates, collecting up the shiny colourful sequins that had fallen off the costumes of the revelers who had passed on that route while they jumped up to the beat of the brass band and the steel pan band. The sequins seemed to tremble in my hands as I imagined the rhythm of music and motion still to be in them. Things have changed since then, and changed back again, back and forth numerous times, but when I was a child, though there was a handful of radical Indians who participated in these events, those Indians would have been considered of low breeding, and if that Indian was female, she would have found herself bereft of respect.

I didn't understand what being a good Indian girl meant to anyone else, but to me it meant having to be a tourist in my own country. A town-Indian girl, burning with the town's current fever of Trinidad nationalism, wanted to assert her Trinidadianess, to take up space on a stage and gyrate her hips like the young black girls in the new national dance troupes. She wanted to dress in a costume and jump in the streets to the rhythm of calypso music on carnival Tuesday. She wanted to play, not the piano, but pan. How delicious Moonlight Sonata sounded, how rich Beethoven's Fifth, played by the steel pan orchestras, their sounds heard from the practice yards, floating across the hills and coconut trees, tinkling through neighbourhoods and entering one's dreams well into the early hours of morning. She wanted to recite, not Keats, Shelley nor Blake, nor even passages from her grandmother's Bhagawat Gita. What she wanted to shout out loud were the words of the Caribbean poet Linton Kwesi Johnson who wrote:

outta dis rock
shall come
a greena riddim . . .
vibratin violence
is how wi move
rockin wid green riddim
de drout
an dry root out

Years later I would leave Trinidad to go to Canada to study at a Canadian university. In Trinidad, where almost half the population was of Indian origin, I had never met anyone who was born in India—to my mind, in other words, a bona fide Indian. Here I met real everyone—Ukrainians, Jews, Egyptians, Japanese, Chinese, Australians. Everybody! And among them, My First Real Indian.

It surprised me that, in the moment of meeting him, the latent Indianness my grandmother had been trying to pry open blinked like a suddenly

awakening eye. I was ready to learn of myself, to learn my culture from him. I was finally ready and willing. But not long after meeting him, during the course of a Trinidadian-style Indian meal which in my rented student's apartment in London, Ontario, I had with great pride and anticipation prepared for him and a few other friends, he informed me in front of everyone that Trinidad's version of all things Indian—the food, the religion, the people—were inauthentic. Among his words to me, said with laughter surrounding them, perhaps to offer some kind of pillow to a truth, were “you are a bastardized Indian.” On the outside I laughed back, agreed, played with the idea, but inside I felt ill, ill-formed, ill-informed, and hugely confused.

I was actually born in Dublin, Ireland, where my parents resided while my father attended medical college. I wasn't a year old when my mother brought me to Trinidad where I stayed with her parents. She left for Ireland immediately again to be with my father. Then, when I was about six they returned to Trinidad and I was reunited with them. And so the ruptures, bred in the marrow more than a century before, were continued in this “new world,” and were appropriately complicated further—fodder for stories galore.

It is there, in Trinidad, that I lived until 1981 when I immigrated to Canada. As I mentioned before, politics was very much a part of our life. My parents discussed the island's politics at the dinner table, and even as children we were encouraged to know and to have opinions about what was going on. So as an immigrant to Canada, guided by an ingrained sense of social responsibility, when I started applying for arts grants from Canadian funding sources, I decided it was time to make a commitment and to become a Canadian citizen. It was a mildly traumatic decision, but any feelings of disloyalty to my home country, to Trinidad, that is, were diminished by the knowledge that Trinidad permitted dual citizenship.

Later on, after I became a Canadian citizen, I returned home for a visit and at immigration at the airport I entered the residents' line up. When I reached the immigration officer he took my Canadian passport and asked me why I had entered the residents' queue. I told him that I had dual citizenship. He studied my passport and said, “Dual citizenship? With which two countries?” and I responded, as if he were daft, “Well, Trinidad and Canada!”

He said, “Trinidad permits dual citizenship, but you were born in Ireland and this passport indicates that you are Canadian, so you have no Trinidadian citizenship.”

I explained to him that my parents were Trinidadian, that I lived there from the time I was a few months old until I was twenty-four, and that my

entire sensibility was Trinidadian. He listened, but he was unmoved. Seeing the blank stare on his face I stopped myself from pleading with him; I decided not to bother to tell him about the subject matter of my paintings: papaya trees, cattle egret, carib grackle, baliser, and chaconia, of my sense of light and colour, and of my writing—or even that my childhood bedroom was still intact in Bel Air, La Romain. He stamped my passport and handed me a paper that I was to present to immigration on my exit, to prove that I had not overstayed my welcome.

Not long after, I was invited to read from one of my novels at a writers' festival in Ottawa. I was asked because my novel had just been nominated for some prizes and it was very much in the news at the time. It turned out, just by chance, that the major theme of the festival was a showcase of Irish writers, and Seamus Heaney and others were brought over from Ireland. It was discovered on the opening night that I was born in Dublin. I told the story on stage of this fact being a mostly inconvenient footnote in my life and the cause of me losing my Trinidadian citizenship. And I read a well-received poem I had written called "All the Irish I Know":

Oh Sullivan! Oh Keefe! Oh Sharkey!
Mc Namee Siobhan Mcguire.
Naill Erin banshee begorrah?
Elish ni gwivnamacort,
Kavanagh!
Healy Mcliamurphy.
Dermot durcan, Healy!
Oh Sullivan, Oh Keefe, Oh Sharkey!
Leprechaun begorrah! (95)

There was much laughter, and a good bit of kidding around after. The Irish Consulate General happened to be in the audience. After the event the organizers began to introduce me to her but she cut them short and addressed me very sternly. She said to me, "Madam, whether you like it or not, you were born in Ireland, and you are Irish. There is nothing you can do about that. Or at the very least it would not be easy to renounce your Irish nationality. Ireland does not easily give up its citizens, you know."

The very first cinema that I was ever exposed to was when I was a child in Trinidad. My mother's father used to take me regularly, every other week, to the Metro Cinema in San Fernando to see the latest Indian movie that had arrived on the island. The only language I knew at the time was my child's version of Trinidad-style English. The movies were likely in Hindi, and even if there had been subtitles they would have been useless as I was not yet

reading fluently. But, thanks to a continuum of themes and actors from one film to the next, I quickly picked up the story lines, and recognized certain stars. I had been very enamoured then of Shashi Kapoor and his Elvis-look-alike brother Shammi, and in no time they and the roles they played became my models.

One could say that to this date the model of masculinity I am most at home with in my own performance of a female masculinity is that of the Indian starboy, as we called him back then, the one who was wronged, fought for justice in the fairest but loneliest of ways, the one who, only when he was outnumbered by an impossibly large gang of heavy-metal chain-wielding thugs and subjected to a beating that left him with a bloody but neat gash on the side of his forehead, would he finally be forced to clench his fists, and resort to violence. Against all odds and those kinds of numbers, he would, somewhat reluctantly at first but then with dance-like agility and the studied precision of a ninja, deliver a series of blows that would result in him winning back his dignity, the family that had mistakenly shunned him, his and their reputation, and the girl who had danced, sung, and cried with him (in his attire of incredibly beautiful vests and rakishly worn scarves) through wheat fields, around lakes, and on the slopes of the Himalayas.

On returning home from those movies I would stand in front of the mirror, an angled gash of red painted on my forehead, or a Band-Aid applied just above my eyebrow. I would slip my thumbs into the loops of my jeans, and in a flash draw my guns, or deliver a fistful at the face of my imagined enemy, or with a studied chivalry, lean my side against the dresser in my room as I applied an equally studied and contradictory softness of the gaze of the starboy as he looked longingly, yet smugly, at the object of his desire. I imagined her looking back up at me, noting my bloodied forehead, admiring my cream-coloured scarf, my tall cowboy boots, and accepting me fully for all that I was and was not.

In the days of the 1960s, the people in my country (not the country of my film-influenced imagination, but Trinidad) who held the balance of power in more ways than one, were still the whites—recently arrived expatriate Scottish and English ones, as well as the local ones descended from British and from French plantation owners whose families had been on the island many generations longer than mine. From seven-years-old until I was eleven I attended an exclusive private primary school in Vista Bela, Trinidad, where my sister and I, and one other brown-skinned girl named Joy, were the only non-whites. The remaining eighteen students were a mixture of Trinidadian

white children of bank managers and business owners, and children of white foreigners who were stationed on the island, attached in some administrative way to oil companies or construction companies. At that school our sole teacher was a white English woman, named Mrs. Kelly. Although my father was a doctor, he was of South Asian descent, meaning he was an Indo-Trinidadian, further meaning he was dark-skinned. I watched him, forever polite to anyone regardless of class or race, defer just that much more, however, to white managers, administrators, business owners. In turn we, his family, were let into those people's private lives, feted fully by them. In yet another twist in the rope of reciprocations our house was always full of white children come to play with us and to swim in our pool, one of the only two private swimming pools in the town then. At the cocktail parties my parents frequently held white couples were, by far, in the majority. Whiteness, the power it wielded for no other reason than itself, the style it seemed to own, was, naturally, as coveted as it was despised. White women were often objects of desire, as evidenced by calypsos—for instance, The Mighty Sparrow's:

Two white women traveling through Africa
find themselves in the hands of a cannibal head hunter
I envy the Congo Man, I wish I could go and shake his hand
but me, you know how many trap I set?
And still, I never eat a white meat yet

They also caused a good number of rumoured affairs and broken hearts. While there was a certain amount of social mixing allowed on the streets, in the sheets this was all but forbidden—by all sides, in general, and when it did occur, it was an underground affair or those involved suffered ostracization. None of this was lost on a hyper-aware child.

When *The Sound of Music* played in the cinema, the Indian starboy in me came face to face with her, or perhaps I should say, *his* first big love, Liesl, the eldest daughter of Captain Von Trapp. I so yearned throughout that movie, and the fourteen other times I saw it, to jump into the picture on the screen, transformed into my own version of Shammi Kapoor, to give Rolf, Liesl's Nazi love interest, a good thrashing, and to win the heart of Liesl, and the approval of her father Captain Von Trapp. If the origins of that white object of desire have been laid bare, old learnings die hard. You make a promise not to ever look at a white woman again, but before the line of that promise has been drawn, one rounds the corner, and you are left shaking your head at yourself, saying, well, indeed, promises were made to be broken.

In my Trinidad days I did not come across women whom I could have

pegged to be lesbian, the word even unheard of in my world then. But every fibre of my self seemed to act and react in different ways from all I saw of how the other females in my family, in our social world, and even on the public street operated. I scanned rooms, crowds, the streets, for others who might be like myself. I had the uncomfortable sense that my body (torso thick and waistless, eyes big wide open always staring, lips pouted in stern curiosity, slow to crack a smile, legs itching to run run run, arms wanting to swing a cricket bat, hands to snap at, stop a frog in mid-leap) was playing tricks on me. I offered myself the explanation that I was really a boy, a fact that would in time become clear to all—and I would win back my dignity, the family that had mistakenly shunned me, my and their reputation, and the girl who had danced, sung, and cried with me . . .

Time passed. No magic ever occurred, but tricks were still played: breasts grew, belly rounded, back and arms took on the proportions handed down by grandmothers, mother, and the daily profusion of Indo-Trinidadian-style sweets. From comments flung down like bits of dung that had accidentally dirtied the hands, I knew that certain kinds of female people and male people were laughed at, scorned, ridiculed, not accepted into “our” circles. I sensed that I was one of those name-less, community-less people.

It was clear that I would never be as pretty as girls who looked and performed the applauded version of what girls were supposed to be, and that I wouldn’t be—and didn’t want to be—as competent as they were in the ways of courting and being courted by boys, or be the object of potential mothers-in-law’s interests and inquiries. To quietly underscore and ensure all of this I adopted a dress code that all but made me invisible. Jeans with loops for a good wide belt, wide enough for a holster and gun (which I wouldn’t have used, except to scare away bores and bigots), baggy shirts that hid my straight-sided torso, with a collar and buttons, and on my feet flat, casual sandals or slippers, or easy-to-make-the-quick-get-away-in sneakers. This became my uniform, and it was in studied opposition to that of “real” girls—my sisters and the other girls in my school, the women with whom my mother socialized—who all wore a uniform of their own: blouses without sleeves that exposed their upper arms, round open necks that gave a glimpse of their neck and upper chest area, skirts, or slacks—never pants—that had side-zippers sown flat, and which reached above their ankles so that they didn’t trail their shoes, and had little slits up the sides just above the ankle bone, and they mostly wore shiny open-toed shoes with slight heels that made them look as if they were tiptoeing about. While they dressed for the

male-female, heterosexual schedule of time, where boyfriends, marriage, babies, etc. were points along their route that told them how well they were doing, I dressed not to be noticed at all. And it is in the big expansive magical unruly baffling world of whiteness, both coveted and despised, that from young I instinctively sought cover. I just kept hoping that one day I would awaken to find a black stallion with a thick blond mane and tail contained in the garage, saddled and, though restless, waiting—I would leap onto its back and ride it away—either to real oblivion, or to unforeseen, redeeming glory.

Thirty years later, in Canada, the body passed on by ancestry and culture remains, juggled still into the old uniform which is occasionally modified, at least to keep up with changing fashions in jeans, shirts with collars, these days to take advantage of the current trend in cowboy boots and two- and three-toned runners. The Indian starboy's demeanour, too, persists. But in a predominantly white, lesbian landscape, particularly the one where on Friday nights girls become boys or bois—girl/boys/bois surely cursed by not having been brought up on milky sweets, yet blessed at birth with the tendency for the smaller breasts, the concave bellies, the bony backs, I often find myself fitting a bit like a square peg in a round hole. On those same Friday nights the Indian part of the Trinidadian in this starboy lifts his head. He knows better than to kohl his eyes, even though he wants to. By comparison he is flamboyant: God knows I have tried but I can't help the bright coloured scarf (silk, wool, embroidered cotton, pashmina, genuine pashmina, one hundred per cent hand made pashmina—pull it through a wedding ring, you'll see!) and earrings, rings and neck chains—pukka silver all—confounds the femmes and confuses the white-t-shirt butches, and what feels tough on the inside gets called, strangely, soft by the object of desire. Soft butch.

It is said that the soft-hearted, slow-to-fight starboy of old has been replaced in Bollywood by a tougher man, whose dance style is aggressive, his hand heavy on the throat of his love—a move made necessary in part by the West's manhandling of Bollywood and naming of the old starboy's ways as fey. On a recent trip to Delhi, India, I studied men on the streets—the bicycle rickshaw and auto rickshaw drivers, roadside sellers, pedestrians, sons, fathers. Many still sported earrings, all wore the most stylish scarves, several wore kurta down to their knees, and all wore slippers. They looked, in western terms, gay. I bet few were, though.

The Indian man on a Delhi street, soft looking, stylish, is my new starboy.

Ultimately, it is in my writing and in my creative art work that the Indian starboy rears up to fight injustice and to ask for tolerance and acceptance as

a person in a country and in communities that are constantly transitioning. It is through my writing he shows his quiet forcefulness and I am at my fiercest. It is on the page that he and I dare—dare to attempt to purse our lips and blow at the borders of lesbian identity, create new spaces where, assuming that gender is a trillion-headed venus, the inequalities and discrimination of genders within lesbianism itself get addressed, and where that multiplicity of genders is celebrated.

To be seen and listened to by at least one other person is a blessing. To be seen and heard by a community of like-minded people, friends, and well-wishers is healing. To be invited back by the mainstream gatekeepers is empowering.

Simply, I love fiction writing, for it is here that I get to play at these kinds of breakdowns and buildups. But even before I can get to this, as a writer I beg for longer notions of all that we are, rather than the shorthand ones, such as South Asian. Longer definitions take more time to express. In a sound-bite era it is, granted, difficult to take time. But as my queer Indo-Trin-Can stories suggest, transnationalism is not an entirely new story. It is an old, complicated, and on-going one.

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