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4 **Anxieties of Belonging: East Indians and the Cultural Politics of the Nation in Trinidad**

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Introduction

I begin with a controversy that erupted in January 2012 in Trinidad¹ when the Indo-Trinidadian Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar attended the major annual conference for the Indian diaspora, the 10th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (Non-Resident Indian Day), held in India. Persad-Bissessar was one of a few “eminent overseas Indians” honored with a Pravasi Bharatiya Samman (award). The anxieties burdening the fault line between diaspora and nation came to a head, at least for many Trinidadians, when after accepting the award, the Indo-Trinidadian Prime Minister bowed and touched the feet of the Indian President Pratibha Patil. This gesture of the Indo-Trinidadian Prime Minister touching the feet of the Indian President was captured vividly in the media and provoked heated debate. Of the many concerns raised regarding the Prime Minister’s gesture, the most salient demonstrated a familiar anxiety that haunts Trinidad’s cultural politics – the ambivalent national subjectivity

¹ The ethnic composition of the two islands of the nation-state Trinidad and Tobago is significantly different. In 2011, East Indians constituted 35.4% and Africans 34.2% of Trinidad and Tobago’s total population of 1,328,019. In contrast, East Indians accounted for 2.5% and Africans 85.3% of Tobago’s population of 60,874 (Central Statistical Office of Trinidad and Tobago 2012). Given the large proportion of East Indians in Trinidad relative to Tobago, the chapter addresses the situation in Trinidad. This is not to say, however, that the cultural politics dominating Trinidad has little or no bearing on Tobago.

projected on to Indo-Trinidadians² because of their allegedly excessive identification with India and things Indian. To allay fears that Trinidad's sovereignty may have been compromised by Persad-Bissessar's 'deferential' act, some in the Hindu establishment argued the gesture was in keeping with religious traditions. This defense, however, only heightened the controversy by foregrounding the Prime Minister's Hindu subjectivity. Current Prime Minister Keith Rowley, who was then Opposition Leader, expressed his umbrage: "Nobody sent the Prime Minister abroad to represent her religion or her race. She went abroad to represent all the people of Trinidad and Tobago and, however, she feels when she stands in front of the head of government or the head of state she must stand there proud representing the people of Trinidad and Tobago" (Daily Express 2012).

This story illustrates that in the Caribbean, East Indians' relationship to India and things Indian is a highly contested field because this identification threatens their capacity to legitimately represent the nation. In comparison to other diasporic groups, East Indian culture does not easily translate into Trinidadian national culture. This chapter is an inquiry into the challenges of cultural translation and Indo-Trinidadian efforts to circumvent it.

Made 26 years after independence, Trinidadian novelist Earl Lovelace's assessment of Caribbean culture reflects dominant assumptions about East Indians and their apparent cultural excess.

It is the Africans who have laid the groundwork of a Caribbean culture – those Africans who struggled against enslavement and continued their struggle against colonialism – and the reason that they did so is that they had to. They had no choice but to become Caribbean and address the Caribbean landscape and reality. No other group had to. The Europeans didn't have to ... they retained their culture. They couldn't change it because it was through their institutions at home that they were culturally and politically empowered. ... The Indians also were tied to their culture because in this new land where they were strangers, it gave them a sense of being. They had their pundits and divali and hosay and their weddings and teeluck and had no reason to want to change them. (Lovelace 1988: 340)

Here, Lovelace is doing much more than merely registering differences in contributions to Caribbean culture. By comparing each ancestral group's contribution to Caribbean culture based on respective capacities, Lovelace elevates Afro-Caribbeans

² Ethnic terminologies are highly complex in Trinidad and seemingly arbitrary changes in terminology signify contested ideologies of belonging to the nation. Here I use the term 'Indo-Trinidadian' to refer to Trinidadians claiming Indian ancestry because it situates this group *within* the nation of Trinidad, unlike the more common term 'East Indian.' Historically, the term 'East Indian' developed in opposition to the category 'creole,' which signified native status par excellence (Munasinghe 2001 and 1997). My use of terms registers not only their respective histories but also their symbolic investments in relation to the nation.

to the level of 'culture creators.' He harnesses different groups racialized attributes to single out and align 'Africans' with Caribbean cultural authenticity, thereby engaging in the comparative exercise of race making that is critical for nation building. Comparison is constitutive of nations in several ways. As a "tactic of rule" (Stoler 2001), comparison is used to classify, value, and hierarchically place different ancestral groups in relation to the nation's patrimony. In its more subtle forms, comparison performs symbolic political work for the nation by attending to the contradictions of its ontology and historicity – namely, the impossibility of living up to the prerogatives of a general/universal form with a culture history that is always particular.

The nation – at least as we know it – is paradoxical. While it is the most common geopolitical unit shaping the twentieth century, each unit must claim its own exceptionality, its own national genius, in order to 'exist' and be recognized as a sovereign entity among other sovereign entities. In this sense, every nation is both the same and unique, with its own claim to exceptional status. Claims of exceptionalism based on national genius are possible only because they imply comparisons to other such 'exceptional' units. Claiming national genius for one's people, in turn, is a crucial strategy in race making, where sameness and difference are carefully calibrated and ideologically grafted onto the racially mapped national geo-body. Though this ideological racial mapping may be taking place within the nation state, the exceptionalist ontology of the nation state renders race making an inevitably comparative exercise, implicating entanglements with other nations and imperial projects.

This chapter therefore examines how exceptionalism was produced and claimed on the basis of a Creole³ genius in the Trinidadian nation. The ideological production of this Creole genius involved a comparative project of race making that ossified the preexisting colonial racial caricatures of a 'culturally naked' African, who could then become the 'culture creator' in the New World, and a 'culturally saturated' Indian, who remained a 'culture bearer' (Munasinghe 1997). I argue that the cultural excess attributed to East Indians prohibited their inclusion in the indigenizing narrative of creolization and symbolically positioned the group as outsiders to the nation of Trinidad. In arguing this, I focus on the late 1980s and early 1990s, a period of heightened cultural and political contestation of the nation in which Indo-Trinidadian leaders challenged their group's outsider status. These challenges, however, tended to reproduce rather than unravel the comparative logics of race that rested on the exclusivity of the Indo-Trinidadian and the Afro-Trinidadian, with Indo-Trinidadian strategies for national inclusion reinforcing earlier colonial and nationalist discourses on the fundamental differences between the African and the Indian.

The particular historicity of Trinidad (and the Caribbean generally) posed certain challenges to conventional narratives on the nation. The almost total destruction of the Native American population meant that the colonizers were able to treat the Caribbean as empty lands. The Caribbean colonies were also extractive colonies, as op-

³ To mark the distinction between creole as a theoretical concept and Creole as a noun to signify persons of African and mixed African and European ancestry, I capitalize the "C" in the latter.

posed to settler colonies, where every aspect of these societies was geared toward the efficient production of sugar for the sole benefit of the metropolis. Unlike settler colonies, the logic driving development in extractive colonies like Trinidad undermined the cultivation of belonging. The relation of the colonizers or of the enslaved to the land, at least initially, was not one of home. These features combined to demand new narratives of indigeneity to the nation that did not revolve around normative ideas of autochthony. Having annihilated the 'native,' the 'native' had to be redefined in this New World nation. In turn, defining the native subject was significantly informed by colonial race-making projects.

Colonial Project of Race Making

When East Indians arrived in Trinidad as indentured laborers in 1845, the associated planter and colonial race discourses that legitimated the labor scheme positioned them outside the 'incipient nation'⁴ of Trinidad, and in opposition to those of African ancestry. After Emancipation in 1834, planters in Trinidad faced a dire labor situation. Although they phrased it as a 'labor shortage,' the planters' real concern was the procurement of a *cheap and easily manageable labor force*, a demand the freed slaves could not and would not satisfy. However, with humanitarian concerns gaining currency in Europe, planters had to cloak their interests in a moral discourse. To do so, they claimed that the injection of a new labor force would create competition among labor, ultimately benefiting the existing labor force by improving their 'moral character.' To legitimate this claim, the planters had to prove to the colonial authorities that the Black labor force was morally degenerate. To support their case for immigrant contract labor, big sugar planters, much to the detriment of the Black labor force, actively generated a specific discourse on the alleged 'labor situation' in Trinidad (Munasinghe 2001 and 2009). Planters targeted the ex-slaves as the *cause* of their problem and emphasized contract immigrant labor as the only possible *solution*. Making a case for immigrants entailed derogation of the Black laboring population as dishonest, immoral, improvident and of limited mental capacity, the planters' character attacks on 'the Negro' served to forge a stereotype of Creoles in Trinidad as 'free spending, luxury loving and improvident,' in contrast to the 'industrious, diligent, self-sacrificing' East Indian. As the 'big sugar planters' solution' to the 'labor shortage,' East Indians came to occupy a position antagonistic to the Black laboring population. In time, many of the planters' characterizations of Creoles and East Indians became seen as characteristics inherent to the groups, and were later used by

⁴ My use of the phrase 'incipient nation' does not denote a teleological unfolding of a predetermined 'national essence.' Rather, it suggests that a symbolic space for the nation – in identifying 'legitimate national subjects' who will assume the mantle of state power with independence – can be constituted even during the period of colonial domination, when the 'nation' was being positioned against the state, as was the case in Trinidad and, indeed, in all colonies.

the groups themselves to undermine one another. Thus, the 'Negro' carried the same prejudices and contempt as the White man for the 'Coolie,' as did the 'Coolie' and the White man for the 'Negro.'

Almost 144,000 Indians were brought to Trinidad between 1845 and 1917 to work the sugar plantations. The circumstances under which Indians entered the country relegated them to the lowest status. The Afro-Trinidadian workers viewed the Indians as 'scab' labor who diminished their own bargaining power with planters, a view intensified by the 'Coolies' agreement to do work that slaves had only done under coercion. Moreover, Afro-Trinidadian's regarded Indians as culturally inferior: their forms of dress, especially the loin cloth, invited ridicule, as did their 'heathen' ceremonies. In a colonial milieu where Christianity stood for civilized behavior, the practice of an alien, 'pagan' culture further consolidated the Indians' social isolation. It was under such hostile conditions that Indians first established their roots in Trinidad.

Indenture not only pitted the East Indian against the majority Black population, but a host of related factors also conspired to symbolically situate the East Indian as the 'outsider' to the incipient nation of Trinidad. When East Indians first arrived in 1845, they were latecomers to Trinidadian colonial society. By that time, the society had thoroughly creolized, with an elaborate system based on race and color structuring social relations among people of different ancestries. In certain respects, nineteenth-century Trinidad conformed to the classic three-tier social structure: Africans and their locally born descendants, the majority population, formed the base; people of mixed descent and 'free-Blacks' comprised a middle tier; and those of European descent (British, French, and Spanish) were situated at the apex. This three-tier structure altered with the arrival of Indians. Indeed, according to Brereton, in colonies like Trinidad, Guyana and Surinam, Indians were distinguished as a fourth tier (Brereton 1993: 36). The material, social structural, and cultural factors that relegated Indians to a fourth tier situated them symbolically outside the core of Trinidadian society.

The legal status of indenture restricted the mobility of East Indians and minimized their interaction with the wider society, thus intensifying their social and spatial isolation. On arrival in Trinidad, East Indians were almost immediately banished to the sugar estates. Planters also developed legal mechanisms such as contracts, vagrancy laws, and fines to further curtail East Indian mobility. Indentured laborers were prohibited from leaving the plantations unless they carried an official pass, and even Indians who had completed their term of 'industrial residence' had to carry a 'free paper' to prove they were indeed 'free.' Living conditions for the Indians were similar to those under slavery – wretched. Moreover, as Indians were perceived as sojourners, little was done to improve their circumstances or integrate them into the wider society through education or other institutional mechanisms.

The ideological race-making projects which produced East Indians as 'outsiders' to Trinidad were equally formidable. Trinidad's colonial racial order was founded on the distinction between 'pure' races, which characterized the Old World, and

the 'mixing' of races, which characterized the New World. 'Mixing' was a condition specific to Trinidad and, by extension, to the West Indies as well (Segal 1993). The notion that to be West Indian was to be indeed 'mixed' and that 'pure' races belonged outside of Trinidad constituted a major ideological axiom through which East Indians came to be defined as 'outsiders.' In these colonial racial caricatures, East Indians were simply deemed 'unmixable.' This idea was based on Orientalist understanding of the Indian as a person saturated with an ancient (albeit inferior) culture which resisted mixing, and was thereby always rooted in the Old World. The African, in contrast, was seen as lacking an ancestral civilization, and was therefore in a state of imputed 'cultural nakedness' that allowed 'mixing.' This state became privileged as the necessary condition for creating novel constellations native to the New World (Segal 1993; Munasinghe 1997).

The trope of 'mixing' became crucial in casting a new narrative of indigeneity realized in the concept of 'Creole.' The most revealing exclusion is the one that refuses East Indian entry into the category 'Creole' – a word broadly meaning 'local' or 'West Indian,' signifying native status in the New World (Bolland 1992). The term Creole is applied to all persons of White and Black ancestry that were represented in the color spectrum. East Indians were and are not considered to be a possible ingredient in the Creole mix. If mixing was the principle through which 'nativeness' was defined, then to be 'native' or 'local' was to be Creole. Denied the capacity to mix and denied social recognition⁵ of their local connections to other ancestral groups, East Indians never became Creoles. In fact, one could argue that the terms 'East Indian' and 'Creole' developed in opposition. Even today, East Indians are not designated as Creole. Indeed, this exclusion from Creole status had significant implications for the group's positioning vis-à-vis the incipient nation during decolonization, when Trinidadian identity became firmly anchored to Creole identity.

The National Project of Race Making

From the 1930s, political developments that augured decolonization in Trinidad went hand in hand with certain cultural alignments. In Trinidad, the Creole middle classes 'discovered' and appropriated Creole lower-class cultural patterns. In their search for 'roots' and a source of inspiration, middle-class artists turned to the formerly denigrated folk culture, spearheading interest in and recognition of the culture of the man on the street. Established Black lower-class cultural forms like carnival, steelband, and calypso assumed the stature of national symbols, though these forms were somewhat domesticized and institutionalized to suit middle class sensibilities.⁶

⁵ In practice, there was ample evidence of East Indians mixing with other groups, but it is the absence of social recognition that is significant here.

⁶ There is substantial literature on this topic.

While Creole middle classes were mobilizing Creole culture in anticipation of independence, East Indians' public activity reinscribed their status as bearers of a foreign culture. Indeed, during the postwar period, Indian culture in Trinidad became increasingly identified with India. During the centennial celebrations of Indian Arrival Day⁷ in Trinidad in 1945, leaders referred to 'mother India' as their source of inspiration and vowed to preserve Indian culture and their community. Visits by a host of Indian missionaries and cultural performers generated new interest, especially among the East Indian middle class, in cultivating connections with India. In other words, both Creoles and East Indians were actively fashioning their respective cultures during the postwar period, but the social and political significance of the two trajectories were significantly different. While Creole culture gained greater legitimization through its incorporation into the nationalist agenda, East Indian culture (with its emphasis on 'mother India'), was increasingly perceived as a threat to the emerging nation. The particulars of Caribbean history, in concert with the divergent trajectories of Creole and East Indian cultures, set the limits and possibilities of narrating the Trinidadian nation.

Caribbean historicity also posed a peculiar dilemma for the aspiring nations in the region. The almost total annihilation of its native peoples, and its status as an extractive colony, meant that former subordinate ancestral groups had to create narratives of belonging which were not contingent on autochthony. But on what basis can one group claim native status when historical memory dictates Old World origins for all ancestral groups? Narrating the nation in the Caribbean context called for a reformulation of the origins and the concepts of Creole. Indeed, creolization would become central to this new narrative of origins. In this narrative, only the products of creolization – the very embodiment of mixture – could legitimately claim New World origins and therefore indigenous status. Creole was about inventing new identities out of many old identities. Ironically, it was precisely the Africans alleged state of cultural nakedness that allowed them to emerge as culture creators in the New World. This putative lack of culture was harnessed and transformed by nation-builders into Trinidadian attributes of dynamism, creativity, and multiplicity. Since Creole was projected in opposition to East Indian identity in the Trinidadian racial economy, the collapse of Trinidadian identity to Creole during the different phases of nation-building carried the disturbing implication that East Indians were not really Trinidadians. The native privilege accorded to Afro-Trinidadians has historically legitimized their claims to the state, both prior to and since independence in 1962. In contrast, East Indian bids for the state had, until recently, been impeded by their symbolic representation as 'outsiders' within the nation. As late as 1990, the political mood suggested that an East Indian as Prime Minister was 'unthinkable.' But in November 1995, the unthinkable happened, with the East Indian dominated coalition United National Congress (UNC) coming to power with Basdeo

⁷ On 30 May 1845, the first Indians arrived on the island. The date is marked each year by Indian Arrival Day.

Panday, an East Indian, serving as Prime Minister. The UNC lost power to the Afro-Trinidadian PNM in 2002, before the People's Partnership coalition came to power under Kamla Persad-Bissessar in May 2010. While Indo-Trinidadians securing state power is significant, it does not necessarily suggest symbolic equivalence with Afro-Trinidadians in regard to cultural citizenship. Indeed, the anxiety created by Prime Minister Persad-Bissessar's gesture illustrates this continuing asymmetry. The ensuing exploration of Indo-Trinidadian efforts to redefine the nation is less concerned with making a causal connection between such efforts and the subsequent ascendance of Indo-Trinidadian political parties than with analyzing the particular style in which Indo-Trinidadians have framed their cultural and political struggle for belonging. In their efforts to redefine terms of belonging to the nation of Trinidad, East Indians have strikingly deployed the comparative logic of the culturally naked African and the culturally saturated Indian. I turn to this now.

Contesting the Nation

In October 1989 I heard a lecture on "The History, Life and Contribution to the Development of Trinidad and Tobago of East Indians" by prominent Indo-Trinidadian lawyer Suren Capildeo.⁸ It was the fifth in a series of government-sponsored lectures entitled "Let Us Discover Ourselves" to commemorate the 500th Anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the New World. Unlike the previous four lectures, which related the experiences of Amerindians, Syrian-Lebanese, Chinese, and Europeans, Capildeo's lecture took a dramatic turn and provoked an explosion of rhetoric on race relations. Newspapers ran headlines such as "Bacchanal at City Hall," with editorials chiding the audience Trinidadians for their unseemly behavior. When some realized that I had witnessed the fiasco, they urged me to relate the story and even borrowed my taped recording to figure out "what all de fuss was about."

Capildeo began with a warning:

The regulars, let me caution you, this is not the usual lecture you have heard. This is a horror story. ... Now let us consider, you and I, the Indian. An extraordinary specimen of the species *Homo Sapiens*. A remarkable survivor. You are looking at one, a real true, true Indian. ... *We are like no other race. We are different. Indians are a world unto themselves. We regard ourselves as the eternal people.* ... We have been and are witness to a continuous unbroken thread of Indian civilization, which began before the memory of man. We

⁸ Suren Capildeo is the first cousin of the author V. S. Naipaul and the nephew of Rudranath Capildeo, who assumed leadership of the Opposition (Democratic Labor Party) in 1960. The DLP was formed in 1956 by a merger of the PDP (the largely Hindu-based party), the Party of Political Progressive Groups (POPPG), and the Trinidad Labor Party (TLP).

have customs, we recite prayers, we do things Indian, as our ancestors have done thousands of years before, you say, Christ set foot on this earth. So when you look at an Indian in Trinidad, or wherever, you just remember that. An Indian is no ordinary being. He belongs to a special race. (Emphasis added)

Capildeo then depicted the history of his people as one checkered by successive waves of conquering invaders, beginning with the Greeks and culminating with the British. Despite their history of victimization, he declared that

the Indian mind does not submit to slavery. You cannot enslave the Indian mind. ... That is our legacy. That is our heritage. Indians do not seek refuge behind the skirts of indentureship. That is history. History has its lessons. But we must learn and move on. The Indian experience is not to blame the Arkatiah and the Empire. It is to absorb, assimilate and create.

He argued that the Indian saved Trinidad from impending ruin after Emancipation, when Europe, America, and Africa failed to come to the rescue. Capildeo then described the East-Indian experience, emphasizing the hardship, ridicule, and discrimination the Indians faced, before discussing their achievements and contribution to agriculture:

The Indians ... began to change the face of this land. Defying all efforts to confine them to the cane estates, Indians began in true frontier style to open up undeveloped areas of Trinidad. ... By the time immigration ended [in 1917], Indians in Trinidad owned one-fifth of the total land owned and cultivated in Trinidad. An extraordinary feat, remarkable more so when you realize that chattel who were imported to plant cane ended up by being land owning cane farmers themselves.

Capildeo showed slides of early Indian migrants whose stature, adornment, and poise explicitly questioned the stereotype of the indentured laborer, the barefoot, meagerly-clad, illiterate 'Coolie.' He repeatedly stressed the contribution of Indians to Trinidad with comments like

above all, the Indians had brought with them the stabilizing factors of a strong family system, thrift, a penchant for savings and enthusiasm for hard work and a burning zeal for education. The Indians have not only rescued Trinidad in no uncertain manner, but have (also) laid the foundation for its future transition into a modern model nation-state.

Toward the end, he discussed the increasing alienation and frustration experienced by the Indo-Trinidadians:

Throughout the tenure of his history here, the Indian has been made to feel alienated, that he does not belong.... That this is a Black country for the Black Caribbean man. *God knows how much longer it will take to accept us as part of this nation.* ... By 1990 there will be an Indian majority in this nation still believing and behaving as a minority. If you want to dramatically consider the impact that the Indians have on this country just imagine the scenario if the Indians were to cease all criminal activity, drug related and otherwise, withdraw their money from the Banks, cease doing business, leave the fields, stop producing food and dairy products, withdraw from all services. ... Imagine the country then – top heavy with Central Bank and statutory bodies; filled with form but empty of substance. Law and order will collapse. Bankruptcy will be the norm. Starvation will be your daily wage. Life here will cease. (Emphasis added)

He then offered an alternative to this gloomy scenario:

But really, seriously, what of the future? I, me, make bold to say that it shall be a great and glorious future. That given an equal chance the Indian community will take this country to heights unimagined.

At the end of his oration Capildeo received a thunderous applause from the predominantly Indo-Trinidadian audience. It soon became evident to the audience that Capildeo was making a significant deviation from what the establishment had had in mind when they originally sponsored this series of talks. The ambience was at once both electrifying and tense, punctuated by the comic relief supplied by Trinidadians' flair for *Picong*.⁹ The 'bacchanal' erupted during question time, with people representing the whole spectrum of the Trinidadian 'rainbow' (those of African, Indian, Chinese, and mixed race ancestries) patiently waiting for their turn to speak. Many, even Indians, pointed to the bias in Capildeo's speech. The turning point came when an Afro-Trinidadian political scientist made a lengthy speech accusing Capildeo of racism. The scholar put forward an alternative view of Trinidad history in which the introduction of indentured laborers retarded the development of an independent peasantry. Capildeo supporters sprang to their feet, grabbing the microphone from the speaker. The hall erupted into chaos, forcing the organizers of the event to declare an end to the evening.

This event provides an appropriate point of entry to examine the dynamics of the political and cultural struggle waged by Indo-Trinidadians to reconfigure the Trinidadian nation. Rhetorically, Capildeo identified East Indians as the propellers behind the modern nation-state, anchoring their contribution to the nation in their culture. In this rhetorical move, he sought to undermine the projected dichotomy

⁹ A Creole style of speech conveying satire and irreverence, expressive of an attitude that refuses to be impressed by anything or anybody.

between Indian ethnic and Trinidadian national identities by placing the very particularism attributed to Indian culture at the core of the nation. Capildeo's effort to insert East Indian culture into the national symbolic space was characteristic of the broader cultural struggle waged by Indo-Trinidadians during the late 1980s and 1990s. In this period, both Indo-Trinidadian moderate and radical cultural activists, religious and political leaders were united in challenging the hegemonic Creole representations of the nation. They undermined the notion that steelband, calypso, and carnival alone symbolized the national culture of Trinidad and Tobago and argued for the inclusion of East Indian cultural forms such as *Chutney* music and *Tassa* (an East Indian form of drumming).

Indo-Trinidadian cultural activists challenged the notion that their ethnic identity was antithetical to their national identity by changing the culture-history referent¹⁰ of the nation. They argued for the inclusion of Indian elements alongside hegemonic Afro-Caribbean forms. In doing so, they aimed to become a legitimate part of the nation not by redefining what it meant to be *Indian*, but by redefining what it meant to be *Trinidadian*. Despite their seemingly radical stance, the assumptions underlying the strategy reproduced, rather than challenged, colonial discourses about the nature of 'African' and 'Indian' culture. The strategies used to combat the Indian identity dilemma rested on a premise that resonated with earlier colonial discourses that posited an essential difference between Indian and Afro-Caribbean cultures and their respective identities. This approach therefore called for equal representation of heterogeneous elements at the national level, a multicultural or 'tossed salad' vision of the nation, where each unit preserves its identity, as opposed to stressing a common core of creolized Caribbean values and orientations, which would be the Callaloo¹¹-metaphor of the nation.

Capildeo's depiction of the Indo-Trinidadian saga provided a spectacular myth for his people. It incorporated all the essential ingredients of a nation-building charter, including the claim of belonging to a pure, ancestral race. Capildeo's portrayal of the Indian as unique, as the bearers of an ancient, rich and essential culture was an overt attempt to create a myth of homogeneity out of the heterogeneous East Indian population. Capildeo thereby challenged the state and the nation to recognize the immutable fact of difference between Afro- and Indo-Trinidadian, thereby denying the assimilability of the 'Indian' into the nation. It was this difference, rather than sameness, which had become the essential element of the Indo-Trinidadian vision

¹⁰ Through its deployment of specific cultures and histories to represent the nation, nation-building invariably privileges certain human-made relations and features over others. Trouillot: "In a fundamental way, 'nation' has everything to do with culture, for culture and history are its sole constant referents. Claims of nationhood always imply a reference to some past and to the cultural present eventuating from that past. This reference is always a fiction, but only to the extent that all cultural constructs are somewhat fictitious. Cultural constructs always privilege *some* human-made relationships and features" (1990: 24, emphasis added).

¹¹ Callaloo is a popular local dish in the Caribbean in which a number of distinct ingredients are boiled down to a homogenous mush.

of the nation. Moreover, he exalted India's apparently great civilization and undermined the popular notion that only the dregs of Indian society set sail to Trinidad. In other words, Capildeo's strategy mobilized the racial dichotomy between Creole and East Indian to displace Creole as the sole referent for the Trinidadian nation.

Yet, if that was all Capildeo inferred, the 'bacchanal' would probably not have erupted. But Capildeo's depiction of the Indian story was tacitly juxtaposed to the Afro-Trinidadian story, demonstrating once again how comparison is used in national race-making projects. In his speech, Capildeo implicitly engaged the Afro-Trinidadians in dialogue. His caricatures of both groups drew on stereotypes that emerged during the early indenture period. Consider, for example, his characterization of East Indians as "pioneer" cultivators: Whereas land policies combining local government and planter interests had been instrumental in the ultimate consolidation of the Indians in the rural sector¹² and the Afro-Trinidadians in the urban centers, he chose to downplay these structural elements, instead invoking a 'natural will' explanation to account for the East Indian dominance of agriculture. Today, Indo-Trinidadians highlight this contribution as a sign of their superior worth as citizens. Indeed, some Afro-Trinidadians resent the image of the Indian as cultivator, as it diminishes their own contribution to Trinidadian society, both prior to and following indenture. After all, to claim a greater contribution to national development is also to stake a greater claim for the nation's patrimony. In this context then, Indian claims that they saved the colony from ruin and became the nation's primary food producers constitute a major point of contention, as clearly demonstrated by the uproar greeting the suggestion that East Indians had retarded the growth of an independent peasantry.

Drawing on popular stereotypes that essentialize 'Indian' and 'African' mentalities and behaviors, Capildeo challenged Afro-Trinidadian definitions of the legitimate social order and the authentic national subject. In doing so, he trivialized the Afro-Trinidadian story and created a new and particular kind of moral discourse. Capildeo did move beyond a mere discussion of racialized differences by also (and albeit indirectly) establishing a commonality between East Indian and Afro-Trinidadian suffering. Following his glorification of the Indian race, he focused on the suffering Indians (like Afro-Trinidadians) had endured under conquering invaders and later in Trinidad. He poignantly depicted the suffering Indians underwent in developing Trinidad by claiming "the life blood of this nation pulses through the Indian." He was thus attesting to the fact that Indians, too, had "bled for the nation." These dis-

¹² The colonial government provided the first major incentive for Indians to settle permanently in Trinidad. In 1869 a law was passed whereby 'free Indians' could exchange their return passage for initially ten, and later, five acres of Crown Land. Indeed, "between 1885 and 1912, 89,222 acres were sold or granted to Indians" (Brereton 1985:28). Many Indians chose to remain in Trinidad after their indenture had expired, forming a vigorous peasant class, so that by the 1890s villages of 'free Indians' began to emerge. Such an option was not made available to slaves after emancipation, when land policies made it prohibitively expensive for them to become small proprietors. Fearing a depletion of their labor supply, the planter class had been determined to prevent the laboring population of freed Blacks from becoming small farmers.

cursive strategies provided the necessary moral capital to claim a stake in the nation, as for Indo-Trinidadians, the need to build moral capital was all the more urgent because Afro-Trinidadians had long owned the title of victims *par excellence*. Thus, the emphasis on East Indian suffering sought to undermine the notion that victim status was an exclusively Afro-Trinidadian privilege.

However, Capildeo's discourse on suffering also reiterated essentialized differences. He cleverly counterpoised his illustrations of East Indian suffering to East Indian contributions to the nation. This mix overtly challenged (or at least minimized) Afro-Trinidadian suffering and contributions. Consider, for example, Capildeo's portrayal of East Indian contributions to agriculture. While he did not explicitly deny the Afro-Trinidadian contributions to agriculture, he contrasted this to the East Indian contribution. He did so by arguing that, despite the numerous obstacles, East Indians had pursued frontier-style cultivation until they had gone from being "those who were imported to plant cane [into] ... land owning cane farmers."

In strategically associating suffering with contribution, Capildeo drew on the common belief that Afro-Trinidadians used slavery (suffering) as the excuse for their alleged failures. More importantly, in associating suffering with contribution, he sought to undermine another popular belief – that Afro-Trinidadians are 'owed' rewards for their historical subjugation. After all, Capildeo's aim was to show that East Indians had secured and preserved phenomenal gains in the new society *despite* their suffering. Thus, the message he conveyed was that while East Indians had also suffered, they had made a positive contribution to the nation, without using their suffering as an excuse for failure. Indians had succeeded where Afro-Trinidadians had failed because of innate Indian characteristics: "Indians do not seek refuge behind the skirts of indentureship. That is history. We must learn and move on." The moral discourse both connected East Indians with Afro-Trinidadians through the trope of suffering, and distanced Indians from them through the trope of material uplift. In combining suffering with material success as a rhetorical strategy, Capildeo sought to gain the upper hand on the issue of moral capital – that is, which group has both suffered most *and* contributed most to the nation. Such a two-point argument was crucial, as even Indo-Trinidadians would be hesitant to claim greater suffering in comparison to those enslaved. In other words, it was by tethering 'success despite suffering' that East Indians gained the moral upper hand.

Capildeo's zeal in portraying the Indian contribution and suffering was a direct challenge to the predominant Afro-Caribbean ideology of 'racial paramountcy,' in which Afro-Trinidadians had the moral right to rule because none had suffered for or contributed more to the nation. Direct attacks on the invisible Other were encoded in comments such as "the Indian mind does not submit to slavery," "Indians do not hide behind the skirts of indenture," and his prognosis about Trinidad's future if the Indians were to leave. Of course, these attacks also drew symbolic traction from entrenched racial caricatures dichotomizing Indian and African.

Despite Capildeo's and his supporters' emphatic claims that the Indian was an essentially different being from the Creole, the fiasco at City Hall – with its impas-

sioned and humorous exchanges – rather served to underscore the extent of creolization that the Indian population had undergone. Indeed, many aspects of Indo-Trinidadian life, both in public and in private arenas, illustrate such a creole sensibility. Yet due to the ideological flattening of Creole with Afro-Creole, there is an almost in-built resistance to formally recognizing Indo-Trinidadian forms of creolization. As I have written elsewhere (Munasinghe 2001), the fluidity and multiplicity of Indo-Trinidadian practices do not reflect the acculturation into Afro-Creole cultural forms that conventional understandings of creolization would imply. Instead, they reflect processes of *interculturalization*, which theories of creolization eloquently speak to: the simultaneous enactment of multiplicity drawing from a number of idealized cultural models. The multiplicity is evident in the Hindu weddings I witnessed in Cambio, a predominantly East Indian village situated in the heart of the sugar belt in Central Trinidad.

In Cambio, I was intrigued by the way villagers moved so easily among various culturally demarcated ‘spaces’ – movement not conceived here as linear temporality nor space to mean literal space. Rather, the wedding activities I witnessed those Sunday afternoons seemed to embody diverse cultural strains – that is, cultural practices that are *ideally*¹³ understood as East Indian, Creole, European, or even modern – *simultaneously*. Brides would sometimes wear a western type veil with a yellow sari for the initial part of the ceremony, but always, before departing to the in-laws’ house, would change into an elaborate white wedding gown. At the end of the marriage ceremony, grooms would also change into western attire. At the bride’s home across the cane fields, a hired group of Indian classical singers would perform, or Indian film music would blare in competition with the calypso and American pop music pounding from the cars parked on the road side. While the women and little children would sit diligently, observing the ritual and helping out with the preparations for the feast, men would invariably hang out where liquor is in ample supply, either at the adjacent ‘snackettes’ (bars) at the road side, or at the neighbor’s house. Just as men had found creative ways to circumvent the prohibition of alcohol during Hindu ritual events, villagers also managed to get around the taboo of eating ‘fresh’ (meat, usually duck, chicken or goat) by arranging for the neighbor to prepare taboo foods. Guests, including my husband and I, were periodically invited next door for shots of rum and generous portions of deliciously ‘bitter’ (spicy hot) duck curry. As soon as the pundit leaves, the dancing begins. Men, by now intoxicated on rum or beer, usually begin ‘wining’ (a sexually suggestive Afro-Caribbean style of dancing involving the gyration of hips), and nearly always, a few ‘bold’ women join them. The spectacle of women ‘wining’ in public – a practice traditionally considered taboo, but which is increasingly violated in today’s Trinidad – is usually greeted with embarrassed shrieks

¹³ For an excellent ethnographic analysis of how Guyanese peoples’ behavior can be interpreted through a linguistic model of the Creole continuum, one which emphasizes the simultaneous enactment of multiplicity while drawing on various idealized ‘pure’ cultures, see Drummond (1980).

of laughter and amusement. Invariably, a few men and women look on disdainfully and condemn the “vulgarity” of the “ladies getting on.”

At any given moment, these weddings drew upon a number of diverse cultural patterns that Trinidadians cognitively associate with idealized cultural spaces – that is, with cosmopolitan, western, Afro-Trinidadian and Indian norms and values. To reduce this complexity to a mere instance of acculturation is to deny East Indians the creative disposition to combine effectively diverse cultural strains in the process of becoming East Indians in an irrevocably Trinidadian or even Caribbean fashion that attests to their very creolization. The symbolics of the Trinidadian nation, in which Creoles metonymize creolization and, thereby, national belonging, resist recognizing this intercultural space of creole entanglement that includes East Indians. Whether for colonial or national imperatives, race-making projects in Trinidad have been built on distinguishing the Indian from the African. Today, in a nation founded on difference rather than creole (see footnote 3 for explanation of uses of ‘Creole’ and ‘creole’) commonality, these distinctions remain central in shaping Indo-Trinidadian strategies for inclusion.

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