

**Reconfiguring Identity in a Transnational World:  
Indo-Trinidadians and the Construction of Indianness**

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## Abstract

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### **Abstract:**

This paper grows out of a multi-year ethnographic study of Indo-Trinidadian immigrants in the U. S. and Canada. In our studies of migration and family life, we became interested in the construction of “Indo-Trinidadian” as an identity. This term emerged as a designation for people in the Indian diaspora who migrated to Trinidad in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in connection with indentureship. The term has formal and informal uses referring to ethnicity and nationality in official contexts, and to food, music, fashion, and the like in everyday life. As an identity, “Indo-Trinidadian” has a variety of cultural and political supports that operate both locally and transnationally. These supports become salient in new and complex ways for Indo-Trinidadians who make a second migration to North America. We argue that in Toronto and New York—major destinations for Indo-Trinidadian migrants—Indian identity becomes unsettled and problematic. In response, these migrants are called upon to do specific kinds of identity work to manage their identities as Indian, Trinidadian, and American or Canadian. Drawing upon our fieldwork, we describe several distinctive patterns that emerge as Indo-Trinidadians seek to work out places for themselves in their new cultural, political, and economic contexts.

**Keywords:** Indo-Trinidadians, Identity Work, Caribbean Immigrants in the U.S., Caribbean Immigrants in Canada

## **Reconfiguring Identity in a Transnational World:**

### **Indo-Trinidadians in New York and Toronto**

#### **Introduction**

“When you are at home, you are all Trinidadians. So the identity that you have is you’re Indian. But when you come out here, you are different no matter what. So you’re Trinidadian. That’s what it is to me. So in Trinidad you’re Indian, and here you’re Trinidadian.” (Ed, early 30s, New York City)

“For me, honestly, being Trinidadian is more important when you're here. Because, to put it bluntly, that's one of the reasons I wanted to move out of Trinidad. . . . Everybody in Trinidad always talks about the race relations between the Blacks and the Indians and whatever. When you come out into the bigger world and you realize if you ain't white, you're black.” (Keith, mid-late 30s, Toronto)

These quotes illustrate the work people do when they relocate and encounter new and unfamiliar racial and ethnic formations, underscoring how identity is situated and interactionally produced rather than general or essential. Identities matter, as the second quote forcefully attests. The Brexit vote, the reaction to Syrian refugees in Europe and the U.S., the rise of white nationalism in the U.S., and the Black Lives Matter Movement are searing reminders of a racialized world order in which people of color remain at the margins. In this article, we focus on how Trinidadians of Indian descent living in New York City (NYC) and Toronto (GTA) make sense of their old and new identities. Our concerns here stem from a wider ethnographic study of transnational families with roots in Trinidad, West Indies. As our fieldwork

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and interview activities with participants in the two cities unfolded, we were increasingly intrigued by how migrants' experiences of identity became unsettled in their new environments.

Questions about identity have become more urgent as globalization and transnational movements of people accelerate, resulting in the co-mingling of people from widely dispersed regions of the world. Due to European colonialism, the Caribbean has long consisted of people from disparate regions. Trinidad is a multi-ethnic mix of people of the Indian and African diasporas with smaller populations of Europeans and Middle-Easterners, among others. This often comes as a surprise to many people in the U.S. and Canada. First recruited as laborers after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, Indians currently make up just over 35% of the current population of Trinidad. Those of African descent comprise about 34% while most of the remainder identify as mixed (Trinidad and Tobago Central Statistical Office 2011).

Indian ethnic identity is well established in Trinidad due to the large numbers and multigenerational presence of people who claim Indian descent, both seeing themselves and being seen by others as "Indian." In addition, residential settlements, schools, family organization, naming practices, religious institutions, consumer preferences, mass media, and dress, foodways, and other cultural practices all serve to support a locally shared understanding of "Indianness." Thus "Indianness"—in both highly noticeable and taken-for-granted ways—is woven into the everyday life of the island, and individuals' social identities are more or less strongly tied to this. Though not wholly unproblematic—as people do make comments about "really Indian," and people labeled "douglas"<sup>i</sup> raise questions about racial/ethnic purity etc.—shared understandings of Indianness are a robust part of local knowledge in the island.

As a result of the opening up of the U.S. and Canada to Caribbean immigration, changing labor demands, and political upheaval in the region, many Caribbean Indians have migrated to North America in recent decades. The number of these "twice migrants" (Bhachu 1985) residing in these countries is

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difficult to ascertain due to limitations of immigration and census records, but it is estimated that 400,000 Caribbean East Indians reside in the U.S. (Roopnarine 2003) with about 63,000 in New York State (Warikoo 2005), while over 100,000 reside in Canada (Roopnarine 2003).

The ethnic/racial consciousness of Trinidadians has been shaped by their specific histories of colonialism and political struggles within the island. Moreover, in the postmodern era, with the widespread availability of U.S. media and the transnational movement of peoples, Indo-Trinidadians also arrive in North America with perceptions about the race/ethnic order in their new societies. Upon arrival, their direct experience and everyday interactions with individuals and institutions work to unsettle those perceptions. In this article, we examine the complex identities that arise through these lived transnational experiences. In the sections that follow we outline our conceptual framework, provide a brief background on the Caribbean Indian presence in North America, outline our methods, and discuss our findings.

### **Identity: conceptual bearings**

We view identity as situated, fluid, and contested, rather than abstract, fixed, and settled (Hall 1997). We follow Goffman in noting the difference between personal identity and social identity (Goffman 1963). Personal identity is who one is as an individual (a unique set of facts associated with a life history, one's biography, etc.). Social identity is the category or type of individual one is assumed to be or claims to be (who one is in society). In both cases, identity is a matter of how one is seen by others and by oneself—i.e., it is two-sided. In this study, we are primarily concerned with social identity (e.g., Indian or Trinidadian) but we acknowledge that there is a close relation between social and personal identity (as when through a change in personal circumstances one accepts or receives a new social identity label).

Rejecting an essentialist notion of identity, Hall notes that it is “always in process” (1997, 47). Hall’s insistence that identity is lodged within a particular historical formation and the implicit relations of power therein is relevant for our analysis. Identification happens in settings and in relation to a definite set of identity resources. We refer to a historically specific context of settings and resources as the individual’s identity landscape. Moving to a different country involves inserting oneself in/being inserted into a different identity landscape. In that new landscape, a new mix of settings and resources shape identity; identities tied to situations in the old country become unsettled and problematic. This is part of what we mean by identity as situated. In addition, the individual finds that old and new identities shift and recombine through participation in everyday activities and forms of discourse: identity is always in motion. This is part of what we mean by identity as fluid rather than fixed. As Hall notes, identity can shift and change as they can be “worked on by political and economic forces outside of us.” (1997, 57). Further, in the process of finding one’s place in a new identity landscape, one may accept or contest the identifications that are made (sorting through preferences, dealing with misrecognitions, etc.). In this regard, the individual encounters aspects of identity associated with power: processes of contestation open up in which old and new identities may be resisted, embraced, or handled with ambivalence. Identity as a process of identification always involves a “positioning/placing” vis-à-vis others, within a specific socio-historical formation (Hall 1997). In the U.S. context, as Bonilla-Silva (2009) observes, many immigrants from the Caribbean, Africa, and Latin America avoid the designation “black” because they perceive its subordinated status. We explore how specific aspects of the racialized social systems in Canada and the U.S. shape Indo-Trinidadian identity in those contexts.

### **India in the Caribbean and beyond**

The term “Indo-Caribbean” and the more specific “Indo-Trinidadian” emerged following the migrations of East Indians from the Caribbean to North America in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The term was

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not yet in use in Canada when author A arrived in 1974, nor when she moved to the U.S in the late 1980s. Though present in academic discourse and ethnic community publications, it is not adopted by everyone who traces origins in the Indian community in Trinidad (Plaza 2004). In Trinidad, we were simply “Indians.”

The development of an “Indian” identity in Trinidad, despite the onerous conditions under which migrants arrived and labored for decades, solidified over time through the establishment of religious institutions (e.g. village temples), retention of many of their cultural forms and practices (food, music, dance), the availability of mass media such as Bollywood film (LaGuerre 1985; Manuel 1997-98), and eventually schooling (Author A 2003). Inevitably, there were transformations along the way as these migrants adapted to their new context under the weight of British colonialism and the often tense relationship with the African descendants of slaves. Thus Indian identity in Trinidad is marked by continuity and change (Author A 2014; Klass 1961; Munasinghe 2001; Vertovec 1992).

Indo-Caribbeans in the U.S. and Canada come primarily from Guyana and Trinidad as a result of a variety of push/pull factors including economic and political turmoil in their home countries, the removal of racial barriers to migration in North America, and labor demands (Roopnarine 2003, 2009). In these destinations, they encounter Indians from India, other “twice migrants” from the Indian diaspora, and a multiplicity of ethnic others against whom they must position themselves (Ahmad 1994). Like other transnational migrants, they become aware of the racialized categorical systems employed in locating people ethnically/racially (Halstead 2012; Thangaraj 2012). They establish businesses, organizations, places of worship, and media in service to their growing communities (Singh 2000; Tanikella 2009). Such institutions provide supports in sustaining ethnic/cultural identity. However, other forces at work may impede the adherence to aspects of culture. For example, by the fourth generation (author A) many Indians in Trinidad lost the ability to speak a native language since there were no institutional or political supports for it.

Research on Indo-Caribbean identity as a process in the North-American context is sparse. An emerging literature maps the Indo-Caribbean presence in Canada, covering the development of ethnic associations, businesses, places of worship, and patterns of settlement (Plaza 2004; Premdas 2004; Roopnarine 2009; Singh 2000; Teelucksingh 2011). The notion of cultural or social identity is invoked in these essays but with little insight into how people negotiate their identities.

The meager literature on Indo-Caribbeans in the U.S. sometimes mention them in passing in relation to Indians from India (Bhattacharya 2008). In the literature on West Indians migrants to the U.S., they are often eclipsed by the focus on Afro-Caribbeans. For example, Hintzen (2001) notes their presence but asserts that they have distanced themselves from the “Carnival” (taken to be a signature expression of “West-Indianness”), chosen to live among Indians from India, and aligned themselves with that community. Our findings (and those of others) point to more complexity than he suggests. Tanikella (2009) explores the role of Indo-Caribbean media in constructing Indo-Caribbean identity in the public sphere in New York. Such media help maintain connections to their Caribbean homelands but also “build bridges” to India while carving out their place in the U.S. racial/ethnic landscape. Warikoo (2005) shows how Indo-Guyanese and Trinidadian second-generation youth actively produce an Indo-Caribbean identity along gendered lines. Girls produce that identity through their consumption of cultural forms of music and clothing and in so doing differentiate themselves from Afro-Caribbeans, “India-Indians” and Hispanics; boys distance themselves from their “Indianness” by eschewing Indian music and clothing. She found that boys view India-Indians as lower class and backward and lacking in masculine credentials. A racialized school culture that discriminates against those seen as Arab or Indian, a gender order whereby girls are subject to more social constraints, and gender-differentiated media representations of South Asians form the social context influencing these identity constructions. Warikoo’s study is exemplary in its attentiveness to the process of identity construction. Our study aims to focus on

process but targets first generation immigrants with origins in Trinidad, for whom distancing from Guyanese is also relevant to identity.

### **The identity change process and Indo-Caribbeans**

When identity becomes unsettled through the migration process, individuals are challenged to manage their identities in new ways. We refer to the active management of identities—both old and new—as identity work. Identity work involves both making claims about whom one is and responding to the assumptions others express about whom one is (Snow and Anderson 1987; Dunn and Creek 2015). When an individual’s self-presentation aligns smoothly with a well-established array of identity resources, identity work may proceed in relatively routine and unproblematic ways. In this article, we are concerned with what happens when taken-for-granted identities become disturbed and greater effort is involved in sustaining or reworking one’s identity. Some useful clues come from sociological studies of deviant identities. In particular, we draw on Degher and Hughes’ (1991) conception of the identity change process. They conducted a field study of how individuals acquired and managed a “fat” identity. Two dimensions of this process are of particular relevance here: “recognizing” and “placing.” “Recognizing” involved coming to see that one’s old identity was no longer applicable. Through both passive and active cues, individuals discovered that their weight was no longer considered normal, e.g., by finding that their clothes no longer fit or by being told that they looked bigger. “Placing” involved the search for a new, more appropriate identity. Through informal interactions and organized activities (such as joining a weight-loss group), they learned to see themselves as stout, chubby, hefty, fat, plump, and so on. In Degher and Hughes’ study, individuals acquired a new “fat” identity that had well-established cultural and organizational supports. In contrast, in their study of becoming bisexual, Weinberg et al. (1995) demonstrated that the outcomes of identity change processes are not always stable. Their study examined the uncertainty felt by individuals about their sexual identities when they

found they were sexually attracted to both males and females. Recognizing that their previous label (gay or straight) did not fit, they were at first relieved to find a new label that aligned with their felt identities. However, the label “bisexual” (relatively new at the time of the study) was contested by both heterosexual and homosexual advocacy groups. Consequently their sense of who they really were remained problematic and they continued to feel unsettled about their new identity. Both of these studies point to generic features of the identity change process that are also applicable to the immigration experiences of Indo-Caribbean people.

### **Methods**

The subset of participants in this study is drawn from a larger study on transnational families with members in Trinidad, the U.S., and Canada. Participants were recruited via convenience sampling and snowballing. The project began with fieldwork in Trinidad in 2009-2010 and has continued in the U.S. and Canada from 2010 up to the present. We focused on New York and Toronto because we had learned from the fieldwork in Trinidad and the first author’s own experiences that these were key destinations for Indo-Trinidadians and that many families had family members in both of these places. The data considered here are drawn primarily from interviews with 30 North American participants, approximately half of whom are from the Greater Toronto area and the rest from New York. Respondents’ ages at the time of the interviews ranged from late 20s to mid-60s; about 75 % were women; in Toronto, one third each were Muslim, Hindu, and Christian while in New York, six were Hindus, three were Christians, three were Muslims, and the rest did not say. We conducted open-ended, in-depth interviews lasting between one and a half to two and a half hours, usually in participants’ homes. These visits enabled us to document cultural artifacts displayed in their homes and to gauge the extent to which connections with Trinidad and Indianness were evident in household furnishings, décor, and everyday objects such as mugs, culinary items, and the like. Data collection also included visiting

neighborhoods, restaurants, and shops, gathering ethnic community publications, purchasing groceries, dining out, photographing enterprises and street scenes, and interacting with community members.

The interviews focused on the conditions under which migrants left, the supports from family they received, the connections they maintained, their relationships with family, and aspects of their culture they maintained as well as how things had changed after they moved. In analyzing interviews we began to notice themes emerging about how they were perceived in their new surroundings and the variety of ways in which they handled these interactions. These discoveries led to the present article.

### **Reconfiguring Identities**

Whether in Toronto or New York, a common theme was that individuals found that they constantly had to position or place themselves vis-a-vis others in a racially/ethnically diverse landscape. We refer to these maneuverings as identity work that includes recognizing and placing. However, the work that can be done is also reliant on the kinds of supports or resources for identity formation and maintenance that exist in specific contexts. Via the existing literature, our interviews, and our observations, we found similarities as well as differences in the two contexts.

### **Contexts of identity support and resources**

Goffman's (1963) concept of the "corporate life" of stigmatized groups refers to the ways that the collective life of a group is embodied. The concept helps us consider the contexts that make possible living as an Indo-Trinidadian outside of Trinidad. These include neighborhoods, shops and restaurants, clubs and organizations, places of worship, events, community publications/media, and the emergence of a discourse that incorporates Indo-Caribbean and Indo-Trinidadian as organizing concepts. However, these develop within a larger context that is already racialized and classed, influencing where new migrants can reside.

In New York, several of our interviewees identified Liberty Avenue in Queens as a destination for the Indo-Caribbean community. One of the couples we interviewed escorted us there and the next day we met up with them and their friends at a roti shop (a restaurant serving a Caribbean-style Indian flatbread filled with a meat or vegetarian curry filling, among other Indo-Caribbean dishes). This street and neighborhood (Richmond Hill and Ozone Park) are also mentioned in the research of Indo-Caribbeans in New York. A few of our participants lived in the neighborhood; the neighborhood bustled with people from the Caribbean, South Asians, and many other people of color. We noted the relative absence of whites. An array of grocery stores, clothing stores (some offering Indian attire), roti shops, and temples graced the street. This was distinctly different from Toronto. To be sure, in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) we could find roti shops, temples, Indian clothing stores, and small West Indian grocery stores but these were much more dispersed. Our GTA participants could direct us to their favorite roti places or identify a place to procure West Indian groceries near where they lived, but there was no single dense presence as there was in New York. Our GTA participants lived either east (Scarborough to Ajax) or west (Etobicoke to Oakville) of central Toronto, reflecting the more dispersed settlement patterns in Toronto as the research documents.

In these businesses, we noted copies of community based publications such as *Share* and West Indian music playing, evidence of the robust media resources for projecting and sustaining Caribbean identity (Tanikella 2009). Some of our respondents pointed us to publications such as the Naparima Girls' High cookbook (a well-known high school in South Trinidad with a large Indian population) which we found prominently displayed in a Toronto roti shop.

Food was one the most pervasive components of our respondents' attachment to their Trinidadian identity: they sometimes made distinctions between the Trinidadian Indian food and the India-Indian food as a significant marker of difference:

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No because when we started eating Indian food here, but it's nothing like the Creolized Indian food we have back home. When you come here you see red curries and tikka-masala but they are introducing me to these kinds of food here and it's not what we grew up as Indian food. It's like Chinese. Everything home has been localized because of indigenous and the merging of the culture where the Indians and the Africans cook together. Mix and matches. (Pauline NYC, mid-50s)

Interviews in people's homes were usually accompanied by offers of food/refreshment, sometimes Indo-Trinidadian food. However, many, especially our GTA respondents, stated they incorporated a wide variety of cuisines in their daily lives.

I cook all kinds of foods but we still tend to cook a lot of Trinidadian food. Anything curry. Chicken, anything curry. Curry duck, curry chicken, roti. Any of those things. And my kids are used to it but I also cook other things for them because they're Canadian and they like all the other kinds of stuff like pasta and potatoes and that stuff. But we back and forth. (Daisy, mid 50s GTA)

Large scale events like Caribana in Toronto and the Carnival in New York proclaim the Caribbean presence in these places. The Caribana festival was invoked as an important arena of Trinidadian identity by many though not all—some Indo-Trinidadians chose to distance from it due to violence that they witnessed and values (not liking the drinking, cursing). Several GTA participants mentioned that some of their Canadian born children especially embraced Caribana in an effort to claim their Trinidadian identity, as Addi explained during a Caribana week interview:

Addi: You guys are going? Okay, have fun. They are going on a cruise.

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Author B: Oh.

Addi: Down the island of Toronto. That's Carnival, all that thing.

Author A: Oh, they are still doing carnival things today.

Addi: All this week. The parade was on Monday.

Author A: So your kids like carnival?

Addi: We [laughs] When they were younger we used to take them to see the parades but now they are older, we haven't gone in over 10 years. But they love it. They love all the things: carnival.

A key difference between NYC and Toronto was that none of our NYC respondents participated in the NYC carnival. Some noted that the Afro-Trinidadians were more likely to gravitate to that area (Flatbush) due to the carnival. However, one respondent mentioned the Phagwa festival (a springtime Hindu festival) in NYC which seems to attract mostly Indo-Caribbeans. Other researchers have mentioned picnics and fetes (parties) that included music, food, dance, and the like.

The emergence of temples and mosques in these sites have also enabled Indo-Trinidadians to retain connections to their culture and ties to community. As some of our GTA respondents noted (and as attested in the literature), the ethnic make-up of temples and mosques can shift (e.g., a temple that is predominantly Hindus from Trinidad/Guyana can change to one in which Hindus from Sri Lanka or India predominate). A GTA respondent noted that the mosque closest to him was mostly Pakistani (emphasizing that it was not his community), so he went to one further away that was funded by Trinidadians (although anyone could attend).

Clubs and organizations are also resources for supporting Indo-Trinidadian connections and hence identity. We were told of the "Fifty Plus" club (open to all races but proportions of Indo- to Afro-Caribbeans fluctuate) in the GTA and the Indo-Caribbean Golden Ages Association (though this was said

to have a mostly Indo-Guyanese membership and is not closed to other races despite the name). Published research mentions the development of advocacy organizations in Toronto--e.g. Ontario Society for Services to Indo –Caribbeans, designed to educate about Indo-Caribbean peoples and help in their adjustment to Canadian society but also appeared to have been involved in the politics of their homelands (Premdas 2004; Singh 2000). Premdas notes that some Indians resisted the term “Indo-Caribbean as too “communalist.”

Despite such resistance, “Indo-Caribbean” has emerged as an organizing concept, found in club and association names and in community media, creating institutional spaces that connect being Indian with the Caribbean region, and especially to those parts considered “West Indian” (principally English-speaking islands). We note that Sociological Abstracts includes over 2000 entries related to Indo-Caribbean since 1980 and hundreds more for Indo-Trinidadian during the same period.

### **Identity work: recognizing and placing**

In both the GTA and NYC individuals recounted situations in which their race/ethnic and cultural identities were treated as problematic. Thus, they often found themselves explaining who they were, where they were from, how they were different from others and so on. We have referred to these activities as “identity work,” i.e., the active management of identities. The two aspects of identity work noted above, recognizing and placing, are shaped by the resources and supports that are available or not available in the individual’s identity landscape. For Indo-Trinidadians in the GTA, especially those arriving in the late 60s and 70s, part of that landscape was one that was much “whiter” than it is today and one in which the assumption was that everyone from the Caribbean was “black.” In NYC, although more racially/ethnically diverse, the latter assumption still prevailed but the diversity on the ground created more potential for race/ethnic categorical misrecognition.

## **Recognizing**

Recognizing refers to the emergence of awareness that the old, settled identity has become problematic. This happened in several different ways. First, early immigrants to Toronto (late 60s) found they were only person of color, the only Indian, in a setting or neighborhood.

Fatima (arrived late 1960s in her mid-teens): We were the only colored people in our school except for one girl who was mixed with a Trinidadian father and a Canadian mother. So the school had five brown people—my family four ones.

Because of the assumption in both GTA and NYC that everyone from the West Indies is “black” (i.e., of African ancestry), they found themselves having to explain that there are people of Indian ancestry (and a lot of them) there.

Calli: Like he was saying, they ask about being Trinidadian and I would have people say “I thought Trinidadians were black.” People say things like that. I say “No, we have people of Indian descent, Chinese, we have all these different kinds of people that immigrated there.”

Addi: We had to explain because they thought like mostly from the West Indies, mostly Negro people is from there, that is what they would think. . . . They never associated Indians.

Second, most respondents reported experiencing interactional misrecognition by others: being seen as Hispanic, Indian from India, African-American, Guyanese, Ethiopian, etc.

Seema (NYC , late 40s, arrived in 90s): They think we are black. . . . I tell them, no I'm not black, I'm Indian.

Siddiqua (NYC, early 60s, arrived in 90s): They look at me and think I'm Puerto Rican, Dominica, Some think I'm Mexican. And I said to them, "I'm Trinidadian."

Meena: (GTA, early 40s, arrived in the 90s) Many times people used to come and say "Are you from Ethiopia?" I says "No."

Jasmine: (GTA, early 60s, arrived early 70s) So a lot of people would ask, would think of India when they first met me. Many people ask me "What part of India are you from?" And some people would detect the West Indian accent and they would say "I detect the West Indian accent. What part of the West Indies are you from?"

Thus, finding oneself "taken as" something other than one's own felt and preferred identity provided occasions for correction as a form of identity work. In this type of interaction the identity problem appears in a somewhat indirect form: the individual notices that they have been mis-categorized.

A more direct form was also evident: respondents were often asked where they were from. In this situation, the fact that others are trying to place the individual becomes more central to interaction. The individual is called to account for their identity. For example, one respondent reported being asked, "Are you from the islands?" These situations occurred on buses, trains, and taxis. Respondents also found that when they identified themselves as "West Indian" or "Caribbean," it was often assumed they were from Jamaica. They expressed the view that Jamaica was more familiar to Americans and

Canadians; one even noted that Jamaica and Trinidad were confused. This points to the problem of what “West Indian” and “Caribbean” mean in the wider society.

Jasmine (GTA): I would normally say I’m from the West Indies. That’s what I normally say when somebody asks where I’m from. I’d say I’m from the West Indies and if they ask further I say Trinidad.

Vicky (GTA , arrived early 70s): I think they (Canadians) , they knew Jamaica more than anywhere else. They always think you come from Jamaica. . . Of course we tell them we are from Trinidad and we are way down south which a lot of people never [knew?]; the only time foreigners will come to Trinidad is for carnival right?

Addi: (GTA, arrived early 70s): And when you say West Indies the first thought that came to their mind was Jamaica. They all knew Jamaica.

Ed (NYC, early 30s, arrived 2000s): Some of them do not even know where Trinidad is, they sometimes think is in Jamaica.

Another and even more pointed problem, identity denial, often emerged in encounters with Indian immigrants from India: “They didn’t see us as Indian.” Being seen as “not Indian” included a number of different behaviors, such as being approached and having one’s accent or language noticed as “not Indian,” being questioned/challenged about hair style, dress, and behavior seen as “not Indian,” and being shunned—finding that Indians would stop talking and refuse to interact once it was

discovered that the individual was not from India. Aspects of the identity problem can be seen in the following quotes:

Zobida (NYC, mid 50s, arrived mid 90s) Some of [the Indians] are very warm. They accept you. For instance, about two months ago I was going to work on a Saturday and my boss told me "Take a cab." And it was this Indian driver from India and he knew I was Indian but he did not know where I was from. So he started playing the Indian music and I was singing. He said "Do you like that music?" I said "Yes." But when he heard my accent, he knew where I was from. So he said, "Yeah Trinidad people are nice people."

Gita: (NYC, early 60s, arrived early 90s) Well the Indians where I'm working in the hospital we have millions of Indian doctors. We have plenty of them but it is they consider me to be a Negro. They don't consider me to be an Indian at all. Even other Indians, they don't consider we to be Indians. Like they are higher than you. They feel that you are in a lower bracket than them. They would pass and look at you like nothing and go.

Finally, a very significant range of cases occurred when Trinidadian immigrants found themselves in bureaucratic situations, such as the U.S. Census, and found that a suitable category was missing from the menu of categories. For example, they might encounter "South Asian" or "Asian Indian" as a category and wonder if it really applied to them. As they noted, other experiences told them they were not really seen as Indian. Thus there was no apt category. Some respondents told us that they would put down or even add "Other" in such circumstances.

Pauline: (mid 50s NYC): When you have to do nationality for the race for this, I'm other. I'm other. Actually you become an Asian Indian because your ancestors are Indian but you have to zero in to find where you are. I'm not Indian, I did not come from India or Calcutta or Pakistan or wherever.

In sum, these are all situations in which the old identity of "Indian" has become unsettled in the new country. Our focus in this section has been on situations in which identity work consists of recognizing that the old identity no longer suffices. Such recognitions result in interactions whereby our respondents seek to assert how they see themselves.

## **Placing**

Placing refers to moves associated with establishing a new identity more in tune with new circumstances. Degher and Hughes point out that placing involves active search strategies. Weinberg et al (1995) note that the search may be only partly successful and lead to ambivalence: we see this in the case of the various, shifting ways Indo-Trinidadians identify themselves when living "away." Below, we identify four strategies: disavowing, proclaiming, resisting, and educating.

### **a) Disavowing**

When the new circumstances surrounding migration make the familiar identity of "Indian" less tenable, individuals may respond in a number of ways. As questions mount about what "Indian" means in the new country, individuals may feel prompted to dissociate themselves from Indianness. This can take a range of forms, ranging from passive forms of disaffiliation, such as keeping quiet about one's "old" identity, to actively and publicly renouncing Indian identity. The following quotes exemplify some

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ways in which the Indo-Trinidadian immigrants we interviewed dissociated themselves from Indian identity (disaffiliation).

Pauline (NYC): Here Indians are people from India. . . . So I don't go around telling people I'm Indian.

Ed (NYC) Funny . . . when you meet the real East Indians from India here they don't consider us East Indian. We're not East Indian.

Jean (GTA): They will look down on you. And I think it's hilarious because I don't consider myself East Indian. I consider myself Trinidadian. Yeah, East Indian background or whatever, but . . . you cannot anywhere near those guys and expect to be accepted. . . .

When you come out into the bigger world, whether you're Indo background, Afro background even sometimes Latino background, whatever, if you're not white, that's what you are. You are all lumped . . . So . . . forget Indian.”

An interesting variation on this was occasioned by the association assumed between Indian and Guyanese identity:

Ed: (NYC): If you ask any American that knows any little bit around the Caribbean and they run into an Indian Trinidadian, they automatically assume that we are Guyanese. It's not even a question.

Pauline: (NYC) They know of Trinidad but anyone who looks more Indian, they assume are Guyanese. . . . They always ask us “Are you Guyanese?” And I’m like “Hell no” because I don’t know for what reason but we do not like to be associated with Guyana.

Disavowal, then, involves a form of placing in which the migrants search for a new identity that distances them from types of Indian identity that they find problematic. It is noteworthy that this may include not only Indians from India, but also Indians from Guyana, another Caribbean country. We can anticipate that further possibilities might include dissociating from other “twice migrant” Indians such as Indians from African countries (Uganda, South Africa, etc.).

#### **b) Proclaiming**

A second form of placing occurs when Indian migrants from Trinidad choose to emphasize their Trinidadianess rather than their Indianness. Unlike disavowal, which negates Indianness, this form of placing involves strongly embracing an alternative: being “Trini” (as Trinidadians say). In this case, being Trini replaces being Indian as the core of whom one is. The following quotes exemplify embracing Trinidadian as one’s primary identity:

Meena: (GTA): I am “No, I’m a Trini.” You know, I’m a Trini, you know, I’m a die-hard Trini. So I laugh. I like to know that . . . I still feel like I am from Trinidad.

Pauline (NYC): We are not Indians. . . Trinidad of course . . . Yes because here Indians are people from India. So I don’t go around telling people I’m Indian . . . actually you become an Asian Indian because your ancestors are Indian but there is no; you have to zero in to find where you

are. [Everybody laughs] You know, because I'm not Indian, I did not come from India or Calcutta or wherever. Pakistan or whatever.

Ed: You try to have your own identity, which is being West Indian or Trinidadian.

Many of our respondents expressed a strong and continuing connection with Trinidad. In effect, being "Trini" both identified them geographically (from Trinidad and not from India, Pakistan, and by implication not from other places of first migration—Uganda, Guyana, etc.) and transcended issues of race and ethnicity: to be "Trini" was to affirm bonds with a place, not a race.

### **c) Resisting**

In placing themselves, many of these migrants sought to resist the ways in which they felt others were viewing them. Resisting, then, refers to actively refusing or questioning assumptions about oneself that are being made by others. Unlike disavowal, resisting did not necessarily focus on being Indian per se. Nor did it necessarily involve embracing an alternative. Instead, resisting involved turning identity assumptions back onto the person or persons making the assumptions. The following examples illustrate this:

Siddiqua (NYC, early 60s): They say "Are you from the Islands?" I say "No, you're wrong. Figure it out."

Pauline (teacher in NYC): In my fourth grade we have girls and boys and it is interesting that only last week the 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher who is male came across and he says, "What are you?" I said "I'm white." Because I don't like people asking questions like that.

Jasmine ( GTA) : Indians from India would think West Indians aren't good Indians.

Author B: They are not good Indians?

Jasmine: I remember because me and my sister were on the bus, on the College Street bus and we were wearing jeans and there were about five Indian guys at the back of the bus. There was room at the back of the bus so we sat. They were behind us and they started to say "Look at them, they come from India and they don't wear Saris?" I had just got up and said, "We are not from India. We are Trinidadians and we wear what we want."

A variation on this was to distance from both ethnic and nationalistic notions of identity to a more transcendent, values-oriented identity:

Feroz: (Male, late 30s GTA): I see myself as Trinidadian because I was born there. . . Some people try to hide their identity and I don't try to hide my identity but there's a lot of things about the place that obviously motivated me to leave and there's a lot of things about the place that I don't like. There's a lot of those things that I see here and I can appreciate here and I can practice some of the things more freely than I want to practice and be a good human being. I think here allows me to be a better human being than there.

In these passages, respondents described how they pushed back against identity assumptions that they felt were misplaced or improper. This ranged from pushing back against specific assumptions about what being Indian means to pushing back against the general question "What are you?" In these ways, these individuals resisted other's attempts to place them.

**d) Educating**

Educating refers to instructing others, explaining geography, history, and the diaspora process, pointing out the island on a map, talking about Trinidad's diverse population, and so on. We heard many examples of this strategy from our respondents. The NYC teacher Pauline, who was routinely taken for black, spoke of teaching her students about the Caribbean, pulling out a map and showing them Trinidad on it. Others felt called upon to provide lessons about diversity in Trinidad. For example:

Calli (GTA): For those who do not know I'll have to explain we have all kinds of nationalities or ethnicities in Trinidad as well. It's not just Indians, we have Syrians or whatever, whatever.

In the Canadian context, respondents who had lived there as many as 40 years pointed to changes due to not only the "education efforts" of the earlier migrants but to the institutions that have developed in the interim through which "awareness about Trinidad" has grown. These allowed Trinidadians to sustain aspects of their identity. As Calli noted,

When I first came to Canada I was asked a lot and I had to explain a lot but nowadays we don't have to do that. . . . Yeah it has changed so much. There is so much integration now. Even food. Everybody is acquainted with roti or what roti is. . . . Many, many years ago you had to explain all the time. Some people didn't even know where Trinidad was.

Her observation concurs with author A's, who arrived in the 1970s and encountered many similar experiences. Between the 70s and the 2000s, the GTA landscape had shifted considerably to one that was much more diverse and in which numerous institutional supports for an Indo-Trinidadian or Caribbean identity began to develop. In important respects, educating was one of the more positive and

diplomatic responses to the challenge of placing oneself in the new society. In these cases, individuals accepted a certain burden to inform others about their actual circumstances, provide context, and “connect the dots.”

When these migrants from Trinidad recognized that the old identity of “Indian” had become unsettled in the new society, they responded by seeking to place themselves anew in ways that defined them more appropriately. Disavowing and resisting both involved efforts to negate unwanted identities, but whereas disavowing targeted Indianness, resisting involved pushing back against others’ efforts to place them. Proclaiming involved taking a more positive tack, embracing being “Trini,” but while it could be a source of pride, it left questions about race and ethnicity unresolved. Thus it could lead to more questioning, and thus a need to either disavow or resist. Educating also involved taking a positive tack, but involved a willingness to take on the sometimes considerable burden of informing others, with no guarantee that one’s identity would be settled in an acceptable way. Many of the individuals we met with described using two or more of these approaches, and all provided a picture of identity work as an ongoing process.

### **Conclusion**

There are noticeable shifts in identity that individuals are working out in different ways. But all involve recognizing that the familiar identity of Indian, taken-for-granted in Trinidad, is not working as it did there. At the same time, there are new demands to identify oneself, to account for one’s identity, to place oneself. This calls for active identity work. “I’m Trinidadian” is clearly a popular choice. Others include “West Indian” or “Caribbean.” These identity labels have a long history, and—given what Americans and Canadians can be assumed to know—are somewhat serviceable in the new situation. They also reflect some appreciation of how nation, race, and ethnicity are configured in Canada and the U.S. By choosing “Trinidadian” or “West Indian,” Indo-Trinidadians in effect sidestep or reject the racial

categorizations assumed in the Canadian and American mainstreams. But this sits somewhat awkwardly vis-à-vis what Canadians and Americans suppose or might want to know. These labels (Trinidadian or West Indian) do not address an implied demand to account for what one is racially. What are you? As one respondent put it, Canadians would say, “I thought Trinidadians were black.” So the matter isn’t put to rest by just saying “Trini” or “Trinidadian.” More identity work is often called for. This might take the form of education or resistance. As one respondent said, “You figure it out.” Emerging terms should be noted in work on Indian migrants from Trinidad going forward: “Indo-Trinidadian” and “Indo-Caribbean” are used at an institutional level, in community newspapers, organizations, literature (poetry, etc.) and so on. They are also appearing in academic literature, as noted above. But in our data, people don’t call themselves “Indo-Caribbean” or “Indo-Trinidadian.”

Even as they reject the “black” or “Hispanic” label, at the same time, they do not want to be seen as “Indian Indians” either. While they resent being treated by India Indians as “inferior Indians,” they also see themselves as more Westernized—assumed to be an advantage, given that they are living in Western countries. In a similar vein, we noted that the dissociation from Indo-Guyanese was related to the perception of them as “backward,” as less Westernized. Moreover, as we sorted through our data, we noted there are layers of complexity to “Indo-Trinidadianess” among our respondents—revealed, for example, in it being suggested by one of our interviewees that Author A being from a village (whereas she had grown up in a more urbanized area) embraced more of an Indian culture (Pauline). Among our respondents, it seemed a greater degree of Indianness came to be associated with those who were “Hindu.” Relatedly, the ones who originated from more urban areas and of Christian background were more likely to invoke the music like calypso and soca as part of their Trinidad identity (Jean, Calli). Adding to the complexity of identity, in Toronto, quite a few also claimed their “Canadian” identity in so far that they had become citizens (Meena) and had lived there a number of years and adopted some customs such as calling before a visit rather than just dropping in, incorporating different

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foods in their diet, and so on (Fatima). In contrast, the immigrants to the U.S. did not talk about being “American” in this sense at all. Finally, some of our respondents in GTA talked about how some of their children who had been born and raised in Canada actively sought out a Trinidadian ethnic identity (largely through involvement in the music, attending Caribana and similar events, and putting on a Trinidadian accent). It remains to be seen to what extent the so-called second generation in both identity landscapes will hew to “Trinidad” ethnic identity: it might well depend on as Mary Waters found for West Indians of African descent in NYC, on their local contexts (e.g., that those who grew up in predominantly African-American lower income neighborhoods tended to adopt black American identities, while others growing up in more middle class neighborhoods tended to claim the West Indian identity). In our few interviews with second generation migrants we have done we see a tendency of those who have grown up in more middle-class, mixed neighborhoods to be a bit distant from that Indo-Trinidadian identity. This suggests a need for more attention to social class and residential location. We look forward, through both our own research and that of others, to learning more about how the second generation will manage within the evolving identity landscapes of the post-Obama, post-Brexit world.

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<sup>1</sup> In Trinidad, the expression “douglá” is used to refer to people who are of both Indian and African descent and who are considered to be “mixed-race.”