

## A New Song for Federation

CJG Ghanny

THERE IS ONE PLACE where I as an American of Trinidadian descent feel at once the most and the least Caribbean: the roti shop. On one hand, I am comforted in seeing familiar sights. First, my brethren and sistren: the darkskin brother with rings around his lips, the deep brown coolie gyal in a Trini flag pinnie, the ones whose voices oscillate naturally between "What's good?" and "What a gwan?" without thinking. Then the music: usually auntie stylings like Byron Lee or Babla and Kanchan or, if I'm lucky, some dancehall from this millennium, the music I grew up on. And the food, of course — nothing beats good curry goat or, my heart, oxtails, simmered all day and spiced up to perfection. But at the same time, I'm undetectable. I'm lightskinned and look more like my Ukrainian mom. I can't fake a patois to save my life. I dress more like a reject K-pop backup dancer than a yardie. Most often I just order my oxtails and sorrel punch and go without disclosing my heritage. I mean, what does it *really* matter — they're not checking IDs at the door or anything. Still, a feeling of fakeness persists no matter how good the oxtails taste.

Being around white people eases this dysphoria, oddly enough. Among most of my schoolmates, my book-knowledge of Caribbean history — the slave trade and the sugarcane fields, the failed Federation, the desecration of our spirits and savings accounts by the IMF — can easily pass for native. I cook spicy simmer-curies the Indo way and pretend like I didn't once make my meals from a jar. And I moan loudly enough when we go out about how the DJs never play Caribbean music, save for the occasional Sean Paul or that Kevin Lyttle song from my childhood that refuses to die well into this decade. It explains why I'm different from them, more so than my socioeconomic background, the high school I went to, the neighborhood (emphasis on *hood*) I once called home.

Now, I don't feel fake around my Caribbean friends. I know  
 the rich + lines *Spin out and wuk wish waist. It's rice and peas, not peas*

and rice. *Free Vybz Kartel and RIP J Capri*. But ultimately it's because I met most of them at university, where none of us felt like we belonged to society at large. PWI might stand for *Privileged White Institution*, but for us it also meant *Perplexing for West Indians*. The most exposure we got to our culture, for the most part, was that one frat in the middle of campus whose brothers were a little too fond of Bob Marley. Otherwise, parties never played our music. Professors didn't teach our histories. People didn't respect our lived experiences. Even when we did get together, beef patties and Bacardi in tow, our respect for each other wasn't always there; my sophomore year, one of my Caribbean friends sexually assaulted the person I was dating, causing that relationship to unravel, ends of the tethers consumed in flame. Overall, it was equally as hard for me to relate to Caribbean-American classmates who went to prep school in the States as much as those straight from the islands with hypothetical hibiscus flowers in their hair and creole cusses tucked behind their tongues.

When alienation is the default, what's a diasporic dude to do?

2

MY EDITOR is killing me. She, a white woman who will not be named, is convinced that having Caribbean characters speak in Creole is racist, unacceptable according to her standards. I ask myself, has she ever spoken to a West Indian in her life? Every single one I know writes out their dialect the way I'm doing in the novel. And I know this particular Creole well; I grew up around it. For hell's sake, it's still my instinct to say "Groundpig Day" on February 2 every year. Above all, her edits make the character sound illiterate, unhuman. But she won't let me or my characters live authentically, it seems. I comb over her edits which litter my literature like lice, pick them out, put them under my magnifying glass and vaporize them into thin air.

I vex as I hover my cursor over the e-mail window, where I have composed a polite but potentially-worded response. It's still insufficient. I want to write over and over again, I am West Indian. I am West Indian. I know this shit. Like René Menil once said: "Yes, I

exist, and I have the insolence to be West Indian!<sup>1</sup> I am West Indian, God damn it!

I simply want to say: If yuh eye nuh see, yuh mouth nah must talk. Oh, sorry; are my words too unruly for you? Too uncivilized? It's in vain. I settle on professionalism and send it off hukewarm.

Two words stick in my temple.

*Mama poule*<sup>2</sup>

3

IN WORLD HISTORY CLASS, I learned about the *HMT Windrush*, the ship that brought Caribbeans from the former British colonies to England. Half a million of us were brought over, permanently altering the racial demographics of London and other English cities. The effects are still felt today, with Anglo politicians and pundits referring to these progenitors and their descendants as belonging to "the *Windrush* generation."<sup>3</sup>

My family came over on anonymous planes to be absorbed into multiracial neighborhoods, only to leave me one generation removed from home and disconnected from any Caribbean community on this side of the sea. All the Trinis I know, regardless of how brown they are or how many mangoes they eat or how much soca they listen to, feel alienated from all sides: white people, brown people, the domestic, the international, the older generation, the contemporaries, the islanders and the continentals.

<sup>1</sup> Mémil, *Tracées : identité, négritude, esthétique aux Antilles*, p. 44. The original quote which appears in the text is as follows: "Oui, les Antilles existent et elles ont l'insolence d'être antillaises!" ["Y es, the West Indies exist and they have the insolence to be West Indian!"]

<sup>2</sup> Literally, "mother hen," from French. The term is used in Trinidad as well as the French overseas departments (in the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean) to denote a person, typically a man, who is easily taken advantage of. This merits explanation as one of my readers, who is Guyanese, had never heard of that term before.

<sup>3</sup> Unshal, *Windrush*.

And I wonder, what generation are we a part of? Has it even happened yet? Will it ever?

4

I DREAM about marrying a coolie girl. Why this is, I don't know; I've only ever been in relationships with other men. But it's part of a larger repatriation fantasy that I will probably never fulfill.

Couldn't it be lovely? A home on the beach where mangroves grow untamed. A permanent scent of turmeric in the air. Pickney with messy hairlines and thick eyebrows like mine. Maybe then I'd feel real, genuine, grounded. Different from how I feel now. *Better* than how I feel now, hopefully. But my realistic hope of finding a partner in this vision is quite slim. Besides, I hate the beach, anyway.

There are gay Caribbeans all over the place, gay Trinis too. I should know; I've dated every one I could get my hands on. But none of our conjugal activities have felt necessarily nostalgic for home. That's the American dream, anyway, isn't it? Find yourself someone of a completely different origin and lose yourself in the melting pot. So what are those of us who prefer pepper pot? There are gay Caribbean fêtes in my city and I go when I can. But I think, even if I find the yardie boy of my dreams, what good will it do? If he's as authentically Caribbean as I want him to be, his family won't accept us anyway. Our oxtails will never taste as good as his auntie's. We'll always be something else, something un-Caribbean at best.

I'll stick to wining in my room, alone, with the lights off and the shades drawn.

5

HELL YEAH I shake my ass when Nicki Minaj comes on at the club. I was in love with her the first time I clapped along to Itty Bitty Piggy on the school bus radio in high school and me and my friends rap all the verses to Super Bass, Monster, and The Boys featuring Cassie (sans certain words) whenever they come on at the function. Now, I'm not a full-on Barb throwing virtual stones at Rihanna, etc.

on Twitter, but I respect the hell out of her hustle and her work ethic. She takes no prisoners whatsoever lyrically and, most admirably, she's constantly on her grind.

It's an immigrant kind of mentality that many Caribbeans identify with. Someone once told me you can spot a Jamaican easily because they work 20 jobs at one time. Indian Caribbeans like my family aren't much different. And Nicki would know — her father Robert, like many Trinis, is dougla, an inevitable estuary amidst Trinidad's transcontinental tributaries. Nicki is unapologetic about her blackness and her Trini heritage, but she never seems to claim her coolitude<sup>4</sup>, at least not publicly. Sometimes it stings for me, an Indo-Caribbean who has no visibility in the United States otherwise.

Can I blame her? Her father has been wildly abusive to her and the rest of her family. He, like many Caribbeans both Indian and otherwise, struggled with alcoholism. Oh, you thought Carnival was the only time we hit the Hennessy? Alcohol abuse is a constant trouble in Trinidad — even then, we fare better than Guyana, where alcoholism is the number one drug problem — and naturally it's stayed with the current of immigrants moving to North America. My dad was abusive too, emotionally and physically. For a long time, I didn't want to claim him either.

What do we do when our chain-links to the homeland are razor-sharp and rusty, liable to give us emotional tetanus every time we try to grab ahold of them?

## 6

WHAT IS BELONGING for the doubly displaced? For that matter, what is pride? Am I supposed to rep an India that my father,

---

<sup>4</sup> Though no text is referenced here specifically, the author would like to acknowledge Mauritian scholar Khal Torabully for introducing the concept of *coolitude* to the Academy over the course of various published works; the first being *Créole Abolition: Coolitude*.

grandfather, even his mother and aunts and uncles never knew? Am I supposed to rep a Trinidad that I mostly know through Wikipedia articles and Carnival choons? Or am I supposed to rep this country, one that I never asked to be put in in the first place? Destruction follows me around wherever I go. In India, where they occupied us for centuries and made profits on cotton, spices, people. In Trinidad, where they beat us for speaking Hindi and whipped us with Clydesdale switches. And here, where they made room for us by destroying those who they called Indian too.

I better not move, not budge an inch. It's a harm reduction strategy at this point.

MAYBE, JUST MAYBE I don't have to move.

Maybe I can find the homeland within myself. In my blood that boils like tempestuous Caribbean waters. In my freckles, an archipelago as beautiful as the Antilles themselves. In my eyebrows, bushy as those mangroves. In the stubborn warmth that radiates from me like tropical sunbeams.

After all, our ancestors never thought they'd make home again. They died on the carracks, some physically, the rest spiritually. But they persevered to make new domiciles and destiny manifests. They made something out of nothing, something beautiful at that. To echo Barbadian scholar Edward Kamau Brathwaite, we fail only when we do not recognize the perfection of our own creativity.<sup>5</sup> And our collective creative spirit as Caribbean people will be perfect no matter where we go or where we are taken.

---

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica*, p. 307. The original quote which appears in the text is as follows: "The failure of Jamaican society was that it did not recognize these elements of its own creativity."

Should we need a reminder of this perfection, we can turn to the creatives among us, like Martinique's Édouard Glissant. A few years before Glissant's passing in 2011, he took a ship voyage across the Atlantic with NYU Professor and filmmaker Manthia Diawara. Once aboard the ship, Diawara asked Glissant simply, "When will we arrive?" The Martinican poet and prophet replied, we will have arrived as a people when we have consented to multiplicity — "when that battle is won," said Glissant, "a great many accidents in human history will have ended, will be abolished."<sup>6</sup> I repeat his words with affirmation for myself and my departed brethren and sistren.

I have arrived. My ship has come in. I am no shipwreck by default. I am one and multiple at the same time; myself and the Other; the same and the different, just as Glissant predicted.<sup>7</sup> I am not lost, because I am *multiple*. I am not broken apart, because I am *multiple*. I raise my hand to my heart and pledge a new song for federation.

*Forged from our love of unity,  
curry goat and taro leaves,  
In the fires of hope and prayer  
to Gods they told us weren't there,  
With boundless faith in destiny  
which always was ours to receive,  
West Indians all declare  
with voices crisp as island air:*

*Side by side we stand,*

<sup>6</sup> Glissant, Interview by Manthia Diawara.

<sup>7</sup> Glissant, Interview by Manthia Diawara. The original quote spoken by Glissant is as follows: "For me, the arrival is the moment when all the components of humanity — not just the African ones — consent to the idea that it is possible to be one and multiple at the same time; that you can be yourself and the Other; that you can be the Same and the Different."

*Coolie woman, gully queen, creole man,  
With our hearts joined across the sea  
From Port of Spain to NYC,  
In both our native and newfound lands  
Built on bodies laid over sand,  
We pledge ourselves to thee,  
With no respect for Colony.*

*Here every creed and race  
Find an equal place,  
And may God bless our nations.  
May we benefit from grace  
No matter our birthplace,  
And may God bless our nations.<sup>8</sup>*

As we say in Trinidad, all o' we is one. All o' we is one. Despite our many battles, all o' we have won.

*Special thanks to Oma B. and Jessica B. for proofreading and content guidance. Additional thanks are also in order for Professor K. Maniagra of the Consortium of Studies in Race, Colonialism, and Diaspora, who introduced the author to the Brathwaite and Glissant texts cited above.*

#### Works Cited

- Brathwaite, Edward Kamau. *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1971. Print.
- Castagne, Patrick S. "A Song for Federation." 1959. Song.
- Glissant, Édouard. Interview by Manthia Diawara. As depicted in *Édouard Glissant: One World in Relation*. Dir. Manthia Diawara. Third World Newsreel. 2009. Film.
- Ménil, René. "Problèmes d'une culture antillaise." *Tracées : identité, négritude, esthétique aux Antilles*. Paris: R. Laffont, 1981. Print.
- Upshal, David, dir. *Windrush*. BBC. 06 June 1998. Television.

<sup>8</sup> A adapted from Castagne, "A Song for Federation".