

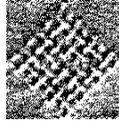
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Landscape, Citizenship and Belonging



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It's been close to forty years since I left Trinidad, and as many that I've been living, and working as an artist and writer in Canada. I'd like to use my personal journey from landed resident on arrival to present-day citizen to try to talk about what 'belonging' and 'outsiderness' might mean today to, and for, diasporic artists and writers who have made Canada their base.

It is here, in Canada, that all my books were written. Nevertheless, the canvas through which I have filtered my themes--themes of love, friendship, family, belonging and outsiderness, to name a few--is primarily the one in which I grew up, Trinidad, the one, that is, I left behind when I emigrated to Canada.

In other words, even though I've lived here for more than two thirds of my life, I have always written and made art with my back to Canada, grasping beyond the continent it is part of, dreaming of and writing and painting the island I, of my own accord, chose years ago to leave. My own work, the heart of the novels themselves, have been love songs to the place I left forty years ago, a place that now no longer exists, for as I have changed so has the Trinidad I once intimately knew.

Many stories told or published in Canada by immigrants are like this: set against the backdrop of congested cities, protagonists congregate in apartment buildings, or in the many nation-villages Toronto (for instance) is known for. Food, foodstores, food smells, dramas dragged from back-home hashed and rehashed, dramas of alienation here, make communities out of characters who in their particular back-homes might not have cared to know one another. The simulacrum of back-home is shored-up by the use of remembered endearing colloquialisms from our places of origin, and from dashed-off words like snow, frost, hail, cold, winter jacket, mittens, scarf--shorthand signifiers for the apparent inhospitality of the new country.

Unlike many refugees today, risking limb and life of themselves and family members to flee imminent persecution or annihilation in their homelands, I was not in any literal physical danger when in my early twenties I left Trinidad. At the same time, presented with the opportunity, I was open to leaving because I had come to understand that Trinidad society was not welcoming to a

person “like me”. And once I left, I could have returned anytime--well, up to a point in time, which I’ll soon address--but I chose not to return. Being able to live openly and honestly has always been as necessary to my practice as a visual artist and writer as oxygen is to life. In childhood I knew that I was ‘different’ or ‘odd’, and, with accumulating experience as the years went by, that in Trinidad I would not be able to express myself honestly either in work or in daily life.

Forty years later, homosexuality remains a criminal offence in Trinidad and Tobago.ⁱ If the laws that make criminals of us is a holdover from the days of British colonialism, politicians today have gone out of their way to uphold them. When a country votes in its first female prime minister, one imagines that society has grown up and is exhibiting broadmindedness.ⁱⁱ One takes it for granted that a female head of state will recognize discrimination for what it is, and make every effort to banish it wherever it rears its ugly head. After all, so many other countries have enshrined protections based on gender and sexual orientation.

And yet, given the opportunity to begin the process towards striking down the law criminalizing homosexuality, and to include gender and sexual orientation as protected in the constitution, Trinidad’s first female prime minister refused to allow debate on the subject, saying that the time was not right for such debate in Trinidad. If I were a Trinidadian living there I would have been offended by what she was insinuating about me, about my mental capacity and my humanity. Nevertheless, even if the law might not have been soon struck, nor protection enshrined for decades, public debate (no doubt in some cases with attendant further discriminations deployed) would actually have brought further awareness to the subject, and public conversation and education would have been begun. Two steps forward and one back is still movement forward, and in some instances, all which could be hoped for.

As it is, with no political will or leadership, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and queer people (LGBTQ) in Trinidad and Tobago risk exposure in order to speak out and stand up for themselves. The organization CAISO is an important space for individuals and is vocal in pleading for society’s better nature to rise up and be kinder, to be accepting and supportive of queer family members and queer members of society. CAISO is positioned to challenge the government to change draconian and discriminatory laws. LGBTQ people are more visible in the country than when I left Trinidad, but even today they/we remain a troubled visibility.

Living in Canada since my early twenties I was involved in the fight for LGBTQ rights here. At this stage in my life and in the gay rights life of Canada I can walk out on the street with my partner, and like a heterosexual couple, hold hands with her. I expect most people will not even notice. But legislation only goes so far. The heart isn’t easily legislated; it’s certainly possible for someone to hurl an abusive remark our way, but we are protected by the country’s hate laws, which are taken seriously and imposed when necessary. It is an amazing thing still that my partner and I can visit our doctor together and our doctor acknowledges each of us as the other’s significant other and responsible for decisions about the other’s life and care if and when necessary.

I could not have written my particular novels while living in Trinidad and expected the kind of reception for which a writer wishes. Had I the courage, the subjects of my books would have been considered taboo and offensive, and I might well have exposed myself to discrimination and violence from acquaintances and strangers alike. But from the relative safety in Canada, and from the relative anonymity here, I was able to develop a voice to tell stories from my point of view and experience, to speak truths, to write towards Trinidad, to sing to the country I left, and to shout at it. I have always needed the freedom to express myself honestly and openly, and I would not have found it in Trinidad back then.

Put this way, Canada sounds like the queer and immigrant writer's dream. But time has been moving so fast these last twenty to forty years that with so much work now published internationally by writers of colour, not only those living diasporically, but those who live and work in their homelands of origin, it may be forgotten that it was only in the 1990's after much hard activism against racism and various other kinds of discriminations on many fronts, that such work started being actively sought after, published, reviewed, nominated and awarded prizes, and read.

Canada once stood out internationally for the attention paid by publishers here to minority and immigrant writers. Support by progressive changes in federal, provincial and municipal arts funding helped bring access and visibility to waves of new voices that spoke of multiple new landscapes of back-homes that hovered inches above the map of Canada.

Writers from minority communities, seemingly suddenly freed from having to highlight only the good, began to tell personal stories, and to reveal aspects of life that were not necessarily complimentary to those communities. Being published meant that not only would our works be available to outsiders but also to our communities, who were patting us on our backs for the delight of being able to see their lives in print. But notions of intended audience were not simple. We wrote along a thrilling line that meandered between the various landscapes, and the political and social groups we imagined constituted our potential readership.

In this sense race activism, and the eventual hard-won responses to it, created a particular kind of work by writers and artists of colour, and also made room for a new generation of critics, teachers, and arts administrators of colour to have their voices heard. These latter might well have brought to their fields, like anyone else, solid academic credentials, but their common experience seemed to be that their skills were once undervalued. Now suddenly academics had, like us, added value by dint of their personal life experience and skin colour. They were at once translators and ennobled native informants. They would enjoy this new currency and credibility, but only as long as they stuck to the subjects of which they were partly a reflection. It would be a while before any of us was willing to admit we were not simply placed in a ghetto but also we were implicit in the formation of one.

And now, for almost 25 years, the publishing industry of the developed world, of Canada and beyond, has been enamoured- or if not enamoured, then wise to the possible financial viability- of the immigrant writer of colour who, crafting fine sentences and culturally intriguing plotlines, is willing to tell the exotic, to bare herself, to expose who and what her community and culture are really like and how she, as writer and as represented by every character she writes, thrives in the place to which she has come from afar.

Did we train the publishing world or did they train us?

I don't know what makes some individuals determined outsiders, and others feel only its pain.

My partner, who came of age in the Vietnam War era in the US, is disdainful of the desire to belong. She says the outsider is free. That belonging is a trap. You're only an insider if you play by the rules. If you don't, she says, you're out. And since it's not really about you, you might as well please yourself.

What makes her think this, and me long for the validation of belonging, is no doubt material for the couch, but the origin of these individual quirks in each of us is what creates the kinds of societies in which we live where some people thrive, some scrape along, some have the ability to lead and some to follow, some to tear down walls and others to fortify them.

The contradiction I see in my partner's thinking is that one must, in fact, inhabit a particular locale in order to be an outsider. To choose to be an outside is a kind of privilege. An artist who has the wherewithal to make such a choice can benefit from announcing this status, taking advantage of being in constant flux, running with new ideas, never remaining the same, applauded, like the Shakespearean jester for daring to speak truths society at large does not want to hear.

But if the status of "outsider" is imposed from outside, that is a different story. For many immigrant, raced and queered artists and writers, self-identifying has not long been a privilege. Identity has been, more usually, imposed on one by others, and pertinent to the subject at hand, by the publishing and curatorial industries--very particular expectations are made of us, and in order to survive in our careers, we end up fulfilling them. By them we are defined, and so we agree to define ourselves, for to survive we must conform and affirm the role of citizen outsider--here but not here, unsettled, always taking off but never arriving. It is as if I have been living in the belly of an airplane that is in the air yet not moving, not allowed to land, all this for the entertainment of others.

In 1957, my parents, both of Indo-Trinidadian origin, were in Ireland because my father was a student in Dublin at the Royal College of Surgeons, one of the top medical schools at the time that attracted foreign students from around the world. I was born there, in Daddy's second year. But

I wasn't there for long. I only spent the first three months of my life there. For various benign reasons, I was taken at three months old to Trinidad and left in the care of my grandparents while my parents returned so that Daddy could finish his degree. I would step foot in Ireland only much later, first at the end of the 1990's for no more than an overnight jaunt in Dublin, and then again in April 2017 when I spent several weeks contemplating what it means today to have been born there.

My early story is one version of a common Caribbean story, told for instance by Caribbean-Canadian writers like Dionne Brand, Cecil Forster, Pamela Mordecai to name but a few- the child left with grandparents while the parents, one or both, reside in the hopes of brighter prospects in London, New York, Toronto- or, in this case, when one of them attends medical college in Ireland.

For the sake of brevity and focus, I will skip decades in my story, save for a few words about emigrating in 1981 at age 24 from Trinidad to Canada. In Canada, as a landed immigrant, I existed in a kind of limbo, with one toe tentatively dipping into Canada, the rest of that foot and the entire other wading through Trinidad. I had a kind of easy-come easy-go, fair weather relationship with both places. It soon became clear to me that it was in Canada that I was more likely to find my true voice in the visual arts. But an art practice would involve soliciting grants to fund my projects from programs administered by the federal and provincial arts councils. And filling out a grant application for arts funding was something I couldn't bring myself, as a landed immigrant who had not committed fully to the new country, to do. So in 1986 I applied for and was granted citizenship. It never occurred to me, however, that in doing so I would lose my Trinidad citizenship.

Naturally, I have no memory of the first three months of my life in Ireland. After that time I lived with my grandparents in Trinidad until I was six, and this time is full of memories of sno-cones, chip-chip accra, and toolum, stories of lajablesse, of duennes, of drinking mauby and coconut water and, even at that age, downing oysters with my grandfather at the back of the bleachers during a football game's half time. At age six I began a new life with my parents when they returned to Trinidad once daddy had qualified, and I grew up as a Trinidadian, immersed there until age 24, all the while forgetting the crucial bit about place of birth.

I found out about this loss quite a while after I became Canadian, on a visit to Trinidad when I joined the queue for residents at Immigration at Piarco International airport in Trinidad. The officer asked why I had lined up in the residents' queue. Taken aback, I said with some incredulity--and indeed with some irritation in my voice--that it was because I had dual citizenship. He asked what two countries I thought I was a citizen of. I said, as if he were daft, Trinidad and Canada. He informed me just as tersely, to my shock and horror, that as I was born in Ireland I had Irish citizenship automatically, and when I chose to take out Canadian citizenship, I gave up my Trinidadian one, as Trinidad only recognized dual citizenship. I stood there for a while not really

understanding what he was saying. When I began to argue he sent me firmly to the visitors' queue. The previously harmless curiosity of an accident of birth was suddenly a rock in my shoe.

But then in 1996, on an overnight trip to Ireland (my only visit since I left at three months, a gift from my British publisher for having landed on the Booker Prize long-list), I surprised myself when from the window of the airplane the Irish coastline came in view and I burst into tears. I tried to intellectualize this surprising emotionalism by wondering if I was responding to some terrible and learned sentimentality, and although I chastised myself, when I stepped onto the tarmac at the airport in Dublin, I broke down.

A couple or so years later, at an international festival of authors in Ottawa Irish writing was being celebrated, and on learning I was born in Ireland, the organizers insisted I appear onstage on opening night with writers brought from Ireland. There, despite that experience on the airplane, I continued with the defensive joking about the footnote of my Irish birth, and how it cost me my Trinidad citizenship and how until that night at the festival I'd been always billed as an Indo-Trinidadian-Canadian writer. At the reception after, I was told by the un-amused Consul General of Ireland, "Madam, you were born in Ireland, and whether or not you like it you are Irish. Ireland does not easily give up its citizens."

Around this time, I happened to visit Belgium, the medieval city of Ghent and perhaps provoked by those recent experiences I was struck by a few things. First, the 12th Century was visible, and bristling: the moated Graven Steen Castel dominated and defined the city centre. As I walked around the city I realized that on that day I was the only person of colour in my sight, on the streets of a present-day university town. I watched the people of Ghent enter and exit merchant buildings that were from another time, and I believe I saw in their strides a kind of blind, unaware rootedness that made me wonder what it might be like to not ever have had to imagine who my ancestors were, what it would be like to be able to trace a personal line down through millennia, how it might feel to be able to visit the grave sites of 12th or 15th or 17th century ancestors.

Now, these experiences have stirred a relentless desire in me to know what a possible belonging to a place might feel like.

I long ago realized that a kind of immigrant writing for a person like me in Canada was necessary at a particular point in time. I believe – while it may not be popular to say this – that that time has evolved. I feel as if my work had, necessarily, been in the service of social change, but while I always endeavoured to ensure that its aesthetic weight equaled its activist value, I have yet to show a body of work that is free of obligations, expectation. That is free enough to truly challenge me creatively. Free enough to see what its unencumbered voice sounds like, what its unencumbered desire looks like. As an aside, I do ask myself now, after all the activism I've been involved in, and despite it all seeing what is happening in the world today, is it possible or even desirable or responsible these days to wish for such luxury?

Still, what I lament is the kind of enracinated citizenship that is the privilege of one born and brought up in a place, rather than a constantly negotiated citizenship that is the result of having arrived from elsewhere and taken an oath of loyalty in the new country. But to approach that kind of experience, one has not only to dare to stray from the safety of a niche that permits a single note kind of voice, but to unlearn the well-practiced and well-rewarded psyche of outsider. And above all, one has to learn how to 'belong'.

If I strip away my perceived need to perform skin-colour, immigration, queerness, I am at heart, in my deepest heart, stirred by nature, by land and seascapes. But when in the past, I bicycled through the mountains of British Columbia and Alberta where I once lived, or now in the country side of Southern Ontario, I could see the land only in its broad sweep, overwhelming scenes apprehended only in passing, their details a blur and incomprehensible, not because they were actually incomprehensible, but as I see now, because I had not stopped being a tourist in the land in which I was living.

Living in the countryside, as I do now, one is obliged to face the elements, to deal with snow storms that leave you stranded for days, (with ice so thick you are house-bound), tornadoes, Lyme disease, with chipmunks that enter your home, rabbits that jump into the fenced off enclosure that is your vegetable garden and give birth there, squirrels in the walls of your house, coyotes yipping as they trek through your backyard at night. One is forced to watch, to listen, to act in a markedly different ways than in a city. It is this, all of this, in one's present life that one wants to write about and to paint and photograph. But to see, and be able to vocalize the language of such a landscape the perennial immigrant needs to enter it in a new way, to 'feel' it to learn it.

I was recently awarded an Ontario Art's Council Chalmers Arts Fellowship, which has allowed me to embark on a year-long exploration of "the poetics of naturalization". The task is idealistic, no doubt. But idealism, a luxury and privilege, is the normal currency of the artist. The task then, is to realize my true self as an artist and writer. This involves wrenching myself out of the double bind of 'immigrant writer' to develop a new imagery of citizenship, a new vocabulary of belonging, a language of affinity and connectedness that transcends the little piece of paper on which my birth has been recorded or the card that records citizenship, and engage with those subjects- landscape and nature, love and desire- that have always stirred me in my depths.

Oddly, and not so oddly, a methodical enquiry into a poetics of naturalization might as well begin, for me, in Ireland. Ireland is, not so oddly- and oddly- the least complicated place to which I belong. To be certain, it is a bureaucratic belonging but, nevertheless, raises the question of what the fact of my birth there, the fact of an Irish birth certificate, might mean to me as I walked the streets of Ireland. Might I there approach some sense in my body and mind I'd not encountered elsewhere- either in Trinidad where I grew up, or in Canada where I've lived most of my life- a sense of right, of belonging?

The three weeks I spent in Ireland turned out to be deeply affecting. I was not there as a descendant of Irish men and women who fled Ireland in the 1840's and went to the Americas. I was not there to trace or reclaim ancestry. I have no ancestry there. Still, I travelled with my 1957 birth certificate and my Irish passport (which I applied for at the beginning of my 'naturalization' project), and I have to say that I noticed I walked about the various locales in which I spent time with a pleasant, hoped for, yet strange, new kind of ease and comfort. It is not just that the place of birth is so affecting, but nowadays the rights of citizenship naturally acquired are one of the few certainties we can rely on. And yet...

In Dublin when I visited the Easter Uprising exhibit at the General Post Office, I felt as if I were for the first time learning the history of a country to which I had ties. But there were unexpected nuances. The kinship I felt with the men and women rising up against British rule was not because I am Irish, but because I am also Trinidadian, and I grew up in a country, a region that when I was a child had been subject to the heavy thumb of the British, and I felt empathy for that urgent desire for liberation.

At the same time, at the 5000 year old burial mound of Knowth which I was taken to by Dr. Jean Antoine-Dunne, how strange it was to hear the Irish tour guide refer constantly to the area's earliest inhabitants as "our ancestors" It was awesome to hear that she saw a line from this prehistoric site to her present self.

On Inishmore of the Aran Islands, how affecting it was to meet people who also have their history literally carved out of surrounding stone.

In Cavan, Anna Harrington, the Irish singer, told me her father was buried at the Hill of Tara, possible today on such a historic site because his ancestors were buried there, and she expected she'd also be buried there.

Some years ago, I visited India, and save for the very same colour and texture of skin and hair shared with Indians, despite my desire and expectations I felt no kinship with all that was around me, felt oftentimes baffled and ignorant, and saw that to Indians in India, I was a foreigner, one of those Indo-Trinidadians who come in search of roots and of belonging, but whose brand of Indian-ness was tediously imitative to them of old ideas regarding a Mother India. I did not find in India what I was able to achieve in Ireland. Perhaps it is because the one-note sameness of looks turned out to be a trick played on me; I was too much faced there with my own lack as an Indian, with my difference. At the same time, it was my difference from the mainstream Irish, mingled with the visibility/ invisibility of the visitor, which made room for me to feel welcome in Ireland. They saw me as a tourist, not as Irish, and Ireland nowadays is greatly about tourism. I could under the cover of tourism discover aspects of the country and its people, all the while knowing that I, because of an accident of timing of my birth, had the same rights as they.

Obviously, any notion of belonging in Ireland is a fiction. But fiction is my field. Walking through Dublin wearing a cloak of belonging, a piece of paper attesting to place of birth in my pocket, attempting to locate some sense of right, somewhere in my psyche and in my body, was a kind of performance art. My hope was that by the time I returned to Canada the fictional cloak would have seared itself onto my skin like a protective shield, that facing inland in Canada, a sense of self discovered in Ireland- a sense of being a person with myriad rights- would remain lodged inside me, and I'd be freed to see and to write about and paint and photograph place and landscape without the sword of immigration, colour, sexuality dangled above my head.

It is, perhaps, a paradox that the ongoing project of learning--learning after almost forty years to belong in Canada, to write and make art as one enracinated in the Canadian landscape--is a gift of my foray to Ireland, of the sense of a simultaneous belonging and not-belonging that I experienced there. It must be said, at the same time, if only in a few words, that I will have to be careful, how I incorporate a new connectedness to Canada, as I've learned in my almost forty years here as an activist, that the North American landscape does not- and never has- truly belonged to new comers. That all recent newcomers (any of us, that is, who have arrived in the last six hundred years) are in other words, guests in these territories. Perhaps, in the end, post the Columbus years that brought us The Age of 'Discovery', imperialism, and various forms of migration -all attempts at belonging are indeed fiction.

Belonging is, for someone like me, inevitably, a failed project. I am not unaware of this, but artists know that failure and struggle is our work's friend. We flirt with failure especially to break boundaries. Experimentation and spontaneity are, I believe, where art and questions and unexpected answers exist.

¹ Editor's note: Trinidad and Tobago's High Court ruled on 12 April 2018 that laws effectively outlawing same-sex intimacy are unconstitutional. The government of Trinidad and Tobago indicated it would appeal against the ruling.

² Editor's note: Kamla Persad-Bissessar served as Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago from 2010 to 2015.