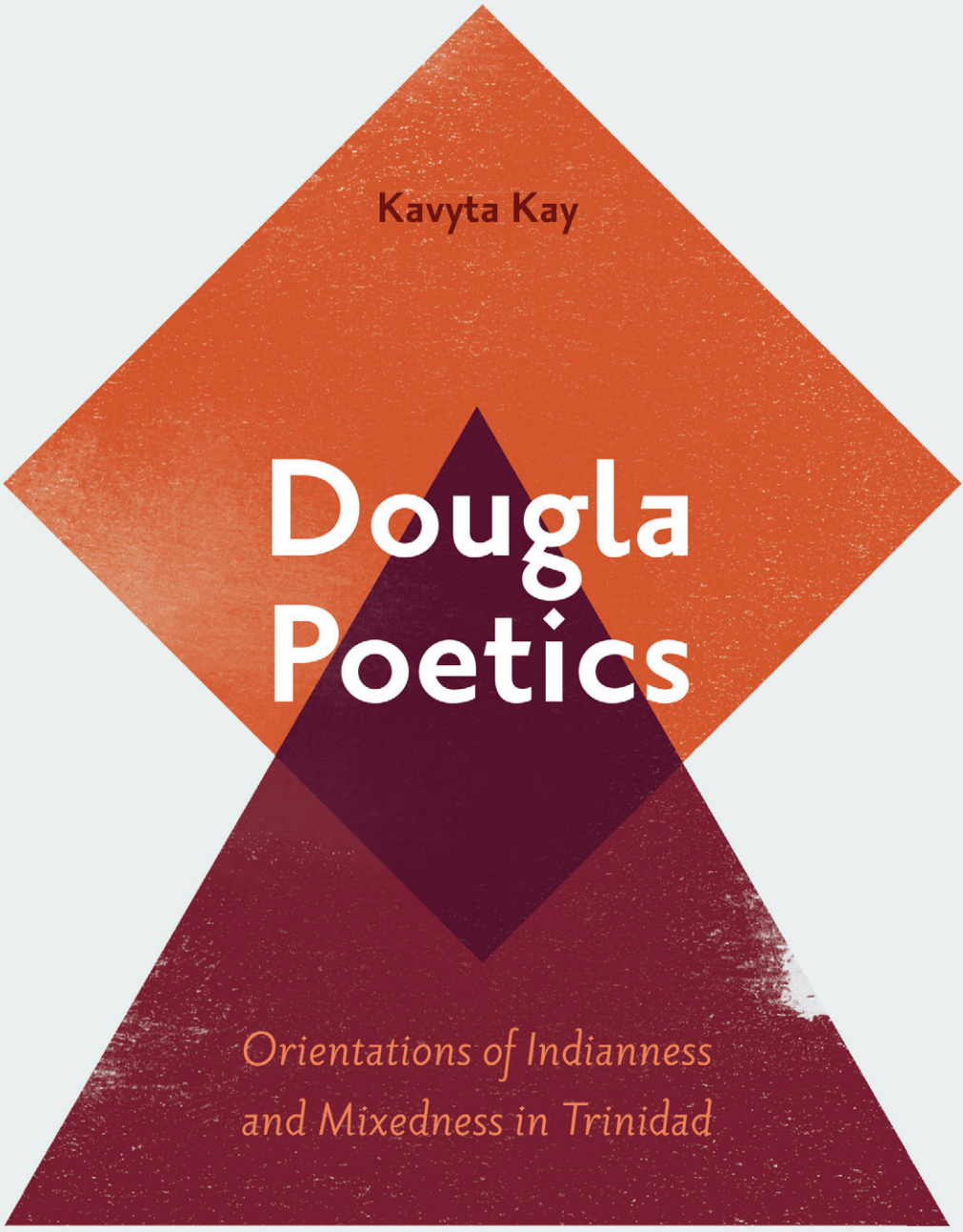

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Dougla Poetics

CRITICAL MIXED RACE STUDIES

Edited by Shirley Anne Tate, University of Alberta, Canada

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Dougla Poetics: Orientations of Indianness and Mixedness in Trinidad

BY

KAVYTA KAY
Leeds Beckett University, UK
University of London, UK

United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

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I dedicate this book to Shirley Anne Tate.
Without her, this journey would not have happened.

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Preface

This book came about as a result of my doctoral research, and the ethnographic component as found here was conducted in 2014. As this book will explore, race is not a subject that most people feel comfortable talking about – certainly not to an outsider like myself. The nuances and discourses of how people navigate culture, identity, race and gender, outside of the political arena, were not only fascinating but seemingly carried echoes of the colonial past in its various expressions which got me thinking about linkages between the contemporary present and the era of Indian indenture in the Caribbean – a lesser known and an even lesser taught underrepresented aspect of British and South Asian history.

I was always fascinated by the journeys of the old Indian diaspora. Whatever experiences of the indentureship heritage that I carry are thanks to my elders. Although I and my siblings are removed from that experience, my parents have not been unaware of their ancestors' heritage and have sensitively engaged with it. While the diasporic movement during that time reads today as a matter of historical archives only for me, and I imagine most millennials, it is a legacy that should always be remembered. I felt a tangible reminder of this legacy during a visit to the UNESCO world heritage site Aapravasi Ghat, formerly an immigration depot where after months of suffering the harshest travelling conditions by ship from India, the indentured labourers disembarked to start their new life in Mauritius. After this experience and in an exploratory conversation with Shirley about the historical similarities between Mauritius and Trinidad, this brought me to a novel by Peggy Mohan (2007, p. 204) who said '....the migration came across to me as a story of women making their way alone, with men in the background, strangers, extras. In the history books it had always been the other way around: it was the men who were the main actors. But there was also this unwritten history of the birth of a new community in Trinidad. And it was women who were at the centre of the story'. Having been profoundly moved by this novel, I decided to embark on my Trini adventure to look at contemporary Indianness and mixedness in that part of the world. Though I am neither from nor located in the Caribbean, I sincerely hope my thoughts are a contribution to a vibrant intellectual community in which Caribbean scholarship has touched me in profound ways and in which works on gender, racial and sexual relations will undoubtedly influence for a very long time. I owe a lot of intellectual debts to writers and creatives whose ideas have shaped my own in a number of ways. On that front, I am appreciative to Shalini Puri whose concept of dougla poetics first got me thinking about mixing that moved away from typical categorisations.

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Books only get made if someone is willing to take a chance on them beyond the author and in their quasi-formations. To that end, I am grateful to Professor Shirley Anne Tate who has supported my work unstintingly. Her serenity and indefatigable spirit often helped combat my nerves. I attribute my ongoing interest in learning about new approaches to race, sexuality and gender solely to her. All the ideas in this research came to fruition in my supervision meetings during my Master's degree. Not only has she expanded my intellectual horizons in a multitude of ways, her brilliance and graciousness is simply unsurpassed. There are no words to express my thanks to Professor Robert Vanderbeck at the University of Leeds for his guidance. He steered this project to completion, and his meticulous editing made this more readable. Robert deserves a very special recognition for his patience, understanding, intelligence and sensitive way of commenting on my work.

I would like to thank all of my family. My father who was my refuge against many personal storms and who despite facing so many of his own battles, never gave up on mine. He had the opportunity to share with me the magic of the island nation of T&T for the duration of my fieldwork, and I will always treasure that time. My mother whose love, inspiration, beauty and humour kept me going. My ever-dependable big brother Kiran and my 'Gran Pouvoir' sister Davyna who were a source of joy during the writing process. I thank my late friend Abbas for his encouragement. Trinidad, the land of calypso, carnival and chutney, has become a spiritual home of sorts. With a big heart, I thank the country and the people for giving me an adventure that I will always cherish and the University of West Indies (UWI), St Augustine for providing me an intellectual community who often made me flesh out aspects of my writing. Professor Patricia Mohammed deserves a special mention, as someone who has not only become a personal role model but whose warmth, intellect and compassion have left a lasting imprint on my work and well beyond. Professor Jane Parpart's warm hospitality during my stay in Trinidad also meant a lot to me. Thanks also go to the staff of the Institute for Gender and Development Studies (IGDS) and Dr Piya Pangsapa who granted me centre affiliation. My understandings have also been helped immeasurably by conversations with Professor Brinsley Samaroo who basically made my visit to Trinidad possible. He sadly passed in 2023, and I will always be thankful to this special human who embodied the spirit of Trini culture in so many ways from his coinage of the term 'Presbindu' to his sheer passion for his

community work. Accompanying him on fun trips across the island, from a sugar museum to community temples and colourful jhandis, reflecting the life and history of different communities remains a fond memory. I also thank Dr Clem Seecharan, Dr Matthew Bishop, Dr Dylan Kerrigan, Dr Jeanne Roache-Baptise for her exceptionally lively seminars and Dr John Campbell for his equally entertaining and effervescent Caribbean Civilisation lectures. I extend my warmest appreciation to the young women for consenting to be interviewed and for sharing their hearts and minds. A special note of thanks goes out to Roma, Amanda and Jason. I thank Vahni Capildeo for her friendship and dialogue along the way. Jamie Bagoo and Sharda Patasar for their assistance and camaraderie. The lovely ladies of Spring Village whose anecdotes had me in stitches constantly and whose advice on the benefits of peanut punch will always be remembered! I am also grateful for the time The India High Commissioner, Dr Malay Mishra, allocated to me. To Burton Sankeralli, a self-identified anarchist philosopher, a special thanks is owed for his enlightening tour of the 'alternative barscape' of Trinidad which comprised a variety of rum shacks and 'neo-classical snackettes' across the Northern range. I thank Jim Mungal, the Trinidad High Commission in the United Kingdom and Dr Maria del Pilar Kaladeen for their additional insights and guidance. I express my sincerest gratitude to my alma mater Leeds University and to Alexa for her compassion, light and wisdom which kept me going through many an academic turbulence. To the editorial and production team at Emerald – a special thanks for your patience.

Elsewhere, I am thankful to a number of friends who have helped in one way or another over the course of my research, especially my dear colleagues at the Institute for Commonwealth Studies in London, and at Leeds Beckett University, specifically the Centre for Race, Education and Decoloniality (CRED), for their highly appreciated support.

Chapter 1

Dougla Threads: Weaving Indian-African Trini Mixedness

Let us suppose they pass a law
They don't want people living here anymore
Just suppose they pass a law
They don't want people living here anymore
Everybody got to find their country
According to your race originally
What a confusion I would cause in the place
They might have to shoot me in space

Because they sending Indians to India (India) and the Negroes back to Africa
Can somebody please just tell me, where they sending poor me? (Poor Dougie)
I am neither one nor the other, six of one, half a dozen of the other
If they serious about sending back people for true, they got to split me in two
From the time I small I in confusion
I couldn't play with no other lil children
If I go by the Negro[1] children to play
They say, "You little coolie,[2] now run away!"
I go by the Indian children next door
They say, "Noweyrian, what you come here for?"
I always by myself like ah lil monkey
Not one single child wouldn't play with me

[1]'A black person; a person of (primarily) black African descent. In the past, often considered a polite term; now often considered old-fashioned or even unacceptable' (Winer, 2008: 631).

[2]The term 'coolie' has a complex and contested history, as it was used pejoratively to dehumanise and demean indentured workers who had arrived from India to the Caribbean from 1893 to 1917. While, in some contexts, it has been reclaimed by descendants of indentured labourers as a source of pride and identity, it is largely considered an offensive racial slur in the Caribbean.

Dougla Poetics, 1–14

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Hear what happen to me recently
I going down Jogie Road walking peacefully
Some Indians and Negroes rioting
Poor me didn't know not a single thing
But as I enter in Odit Trace
Ah Indian man cuff me straight in mih face
I ran by the Negroes to get rescue
"Look ah coolie!" and them start beating me to
Some fellas having a race discussion
I jump in to give my opinion
A young fella watch me in mih face
He say, "You shut your mouth, you ain't got no race!"
What he said to me was a real insult
But is not I to blame, is mih father fault
When he say I have no race, he did talking true
Instead of having one race, you know I got two
So if they sending Indians to India (India) and the Negroes back to Africa
Can somebody please just tell me, where they sending poor me? (Poor Dougie)
I am neither one nor the other, six of one, half a dozen of the other
If they serious 'bout sending back people for true, they bound to split me in two ~ Mighty Dougla (1961)

This book opens with the lyrics from the well-known Trinidadian calypsonian, Mighty Dougla, whose song *Split Me in Two* (1961) ponders the Indian-African location 'under an imaginary law repatriating all Trinidadians to their ancestral homeland' (Manuel et al., 2012: 277).[3] The calypso describes the complexities and contradictions of belonging experienced by a Dougla, a Trinidadian of mixed Indian-African descent, who is 'six of one, half a dozen of the other' and it is striking how the central concern here is not of culture, but of racial boundaries. Indeed, the Caribbean inherits this legacy of racial separation but also mixedness which is at the heart of the making of the Caribbean. While this book does not make any claim to do an overarching analysis of the Caribbean, itself a rich and complex region and concept with divergent parts, peoples and places, it does aim to explore relational racial dynamics using Trinidad as a case-study, paying particular attention to the Dougla body, through the perspectives of a group of Indian and Dougla young women. Mixing occupies a highly symbolic place in the imaginings of the Trinidadian nation as a source of national celebration across a range of social spheres, but it also occupies a space of contestation in which processes of inclusion, exclusion and belonging come to the fore. The paradox of mixing as a national symbol and as nationalist discourses is one that has long

[3]'Split Me in Two' available to listen on Spotify here: https://open.spotify.com/track/6VlJQmBONYcAX4OpS5pxbf?si=e79c8ffe6d184b19.

been a subject of discussion by critics, commentators, scholars and cultural producers. Nearly 28 years later after *Split Me in Two*, Delamo's *Soca Chutney* (1989), diverges from its racial uncertainty and marginalisation as it, draws on the Dougla as a figure of unity in response to divisive Indian and African Trinbagonian populist politics,

> Now who come to divide and rule
> Eh go use we as no tool
> Any time they comin' racial
> I dougla, I stayin' neutral
> Indo and Afro Trinbagonian,
> We should learn to be one
> Our Ancestors came by boat,
> is the salt water in yuh throat
> –?
> Great grand pa and grand mama
> One was ah slave and one was indentured
>
> But the religion or color
> Didn't interfere with their love for one another (nahenahe)
> I am the proof of racial unity
> And that is the way everybody should be (Achchasante)
> Everybody should have the tone in their prayer
> Let show each other we care As we all know
> Jahaji[4] Bhai
> Brotherhood of the boat, Jahaji Bhai
> Brotherhood of the boat, Jahaji Bhai
> Lyrics taken from Zeno Obi Constance (1991)

This book explores the ways in which *Dougla* takes on meaning for Indian Trinidadian and Dougla young women. This category exists for these young women at a crossroads where multiculturalist discourses of creolisation, hybridity and Dougla (Indian-African mixing) meet with essentialist ideas of Indian identity created by the collective Indian descent community in Trinidad. Through approaching this iteration of mixedness with a Dougla poetics and raced gender performativity framework, this work aims to show how these young women navigate the complicated dimensions of their own identity and identifications in Trinidad as inflected by race and gender.

As a specific identity category, Indian holds specific privileges and oppressions as well as norms that if one transgresses carries sanctions and if followed carries rewards. As this book will go on to unveil, Douglas, who were not even

[4]Jahaji is a term used, particularly in Trinidad and Tobago, to refer to the descendants of Indian indentured labourers who were brought to the Caribbean during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The term comes from the Hindi word 'jahaj' which means 'ship'.

designated an official census category up until 2011, reveal a great deal around the politics of identification. The earlier 2000 census revealed a smaller number of racial categories with African at 37%, Indian 40%, Chinese 0.34%, Syrian/Lebanese 0.08%, Caucasian 0.63% and an explicit omission of Portuguese and an ambiguous Mixed 20.46%. The last and most recent census data expanded the racial groups and revealed the two dominant racial groups of the population as standing at 35.43% Indian, 34.22% African, 15.16% Mixed (Other), 7.66% Mixed (Indian-African), 6.22% Not Stated, 0.59% Caucasian, 0.30% Chinese, Other Ethnic group 0.17%, 0.11% Indigenous, 0.08% Syrian/Lebanese and 0.06% Portuguese (Central Statistical Office, Population and Housing Census, 2011). It is in the latest data set that the mixed population is given official and, arguably significant, recognition and visibility through the categorisations of Mixed (Indian-African) locally termed as Dougla, and Mixed (Other). Reddock (2014: 61) reads this add-on category as evidence of the 'mainstreaming of the idea of Dougla' in the national psyche, another reading of this however poses an additional question of state classification versus an identification politics, specifically what identity category does one select and which one at the expense of another in order to be reflected at a national level?

Looking to contemporary Trinidad, the notion of identity is a curiously contradictory one – as an idea and as a social reality, as theory and lived experience. Identity has been theorised in a variety of ways and Caribbean identity in particular has been studied in the context of its 'mix' – racial and ethnic. This region is seen as hybrid and creolised (Benitez-Rojo, 2001; Bolland, 2006; Glissant, 1997; King, 2011; Walcott, 1992). While productive in some ways, hybridity and creolisation run the risk of reifying essentialist positions of identity and a conceptualisation of 'original or originary culture' (Bhabha, 1994). Instead of a series of fixed variables that, when combined through creolisation, merge and produce a hybrid form, one approach proposed in this book is to analyse identities and identifications as both fluid and fixed. In addition to the three classical theoretical models through which Caribbean societies have been catalogued namely Beckford's (2000) plantation society model, Smith's (1965) plural society model and Brathwaite's (1971) Creole society model, all of which ponder on race and class as having effects on processes of identity formation, arguably feminism has contributed a vital theoretical intervention to Caribbean sociology. In paying particular attention to how gender is inscribed within raced and classed socio-structural relations, Caribbean feminisms have emerged as a site of lively intellectual tradition articulating the multiple subjectivities of Black, Indian, Chinese, Mixed Caribbean women, all as mixed rather than in the domain of 'pure'. More recently, Barratt and Ranjit Singh's (2021: 190) work on the ontology of Dougla as a mixed racialised ethnicity, and one that does not force a declaration of exclusive ethnoracial affiliation but which, while implicated in social relations of power, existing 'as a maneuvering subject, both in the Caribbean homeland and in a select region of the diaspora', looks to Trinidad and New York City as sites of meaning and meaning-making. The authors' work on Dougla, as well as this one, is careful not to proclaim Dougla as the answer to racism and racial biases across and within Black and Indian Trinidadian

communities. Moreover, this text differs with its inclusion and foregrounding of perspectives from both Dougla and Indian women.

Taking the expansiveness of Caribbean feminist thought as a cultural and theoretical influence, this book draws on the post-structuralist feminist Judith Butler's account of performativity theorising and Shalini Puri's (2004: 221) conceptualisation of Dougla poetics that offers 'a symbolic resource in the reconfiguration of racial and gendered identities'. In this book's exploration of the intricate dynamics of race and identity within Trinidadian society, a pivotal question arises: Where does Dougla identity find its place in this complex tapestry? This section delves into the interplay between Dougla and broader notions of mixedness and Indianness, unravelling the unique intersections and divergences that shape Trinidadian identity.

Where Does Dougla Fit in Mixedness and Indianness?

This book explores the meaning and negotiation of Dougla for a group of Indian Trinidadian and Dougla young women through a Dougla poetics framework. Dougla poetics works as a conceptual way of exploring the relations between the affective and the ontological concepts of racial categories. As such, this text uses the young women's narratives to construct a Dougla poetics perspective specific to Trinidad in terms of Dougla as mixed body and culture. It will also attend to the double positioning of the Dougla to explore the intersecting categories of race and gender as lived and configured through discursive processes and through an engagement with a raced gender performativity (Butler, 1990, 1993; Tate, 2005). Using data drawn from conversations and interviews undertaken as part of my doctoral thesis in 2012, the focus will be on the young women's racialised, gendered identities and identifications. Through each of the chapters, I unpick the poetics of Dougla to show how hybridity, creolisation and mixing are part of Indianness but also removed from these concepts. The Dougla poetics of Indianness shows how while on one hand race and racialisation are erased under the deployment of hybridity and creolisation as meta narratives and fluidity is invoked under the national slogan 'all we is one' where mixing is seen as quintessentially Trinbagonian, race also continues to operate as a distinctive marker of difference across domains such as trans-religious practices, desires and sexuality, beauty culture, carnival activity and music consumption. All of these areas which are explored in the chapters carry a racialised component. The overarching discussion throughout the book speaks to how the poetics of Dougla works at the levels of culture and nation and interrogates the limits of creolisation and hybridity in the Indian Trinidadian context.

Through a Black feminist ethnography (Collins, 2000), I draw on individual interviews and group conversations to explore how the young women construct their identities and identifications as linked to socially constructed norms and practices. Their talk revealed fluidity in varying ways with respect to their raced gendered subject positions, but they also spoke about their fixity along the lines of racial and gendered hierarchies. I argue that in Butler's performativity theorising,

discussions of race have been largely absent and I turn to Dougla poetics (Puri, 2004), a specifically Caribbean take on mixing, as a more nuanced and significant way of opening up thinking about identity and raced gender in Trinidad. Through engaging this combination of Dougla poetics and performativity, this book responds critically to ways of understanding race and the fluidity and fixity present in this. The primary interest here is to lean towards a more sociologically oriented approach in contrast to a statistical one as the Dougla body is not a term which lends itself to being reduced to its elements or measured in terms of indicators. As Rhoda Reddock (2014: 55) explains,

> Since the 1960s also, the category "mixed" has been used in the census to include parents with parents of different ethnic groups. It is a somewhat amorphous category, as it is unclear what groupings are involved. What is clear from this is that racial/ethnic categorizing continues to be very much a case of self-definition and social context.

With the driving goal of advancing critical mixed-race studies, Caribbean, and South Asian theorising, I argue that a performative Dougla poetics needs to be produced to not only explore the Dougla experience but that of the Indian Caribbean one, particularly, its challenge to fixed notions of purity and problematic notions of transgression. As such, this book is positioned as an intersectional work in which critical mixed-race, South Asian and Caribbean studies fiercely welcomes Dougla identities. The analysis of these subjectivities is put into practice through employing a Black feminist epistemological frame which propounds lived experience as a way of knowing alongside talk as dialogue, not adversarial debate. The study also draws on a situated knowledges perspective in trying to understand competing accounts of social reality. This perspective locates knowledge as partial and situational which means that there is no one truth and that all knowledges are marked by the contexts in which they emerge. As Patricia Hill Collins (2000: 27) writes,

> Each group speaks from its own standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge. But because each group perceives its own truth as partial, its knowledge is unfinished. Each group becomes better able to consider other groups' standpoints without relinquishing the uniqueness of their own standpoint or suppressing other groups' partial perspectives.

The emphasis on local knowledge production and local perspectives is a very important consideration, which is where it becomes a particularly important endeavour to ensure that the appropriate terms are used and to better understand these within a particular cultural context.

A Local Lexicon: Language and Race Categories

Michael Homi and Omi Winant (1994: 55) defined race as a 'concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies' and advanced that the language around this is not only subject to change, but is 'at best imprecise, and at worst completely arbitrary'. This standpoint to view race as a socially constructed phenomenon, which shapes lives and destinies and has no biological reality at all, is one which finds personal resonance and yet, race continues to persist as a major source of inequality at a macro level and affects interactions between people at a micro level. Trying to work from a global definition of race and ethnicity, which are frequently treated as interchangeable terms, is unproductive in the context of this study because these concepts are not only incredibly nuanced, but they are also bound to specific cultural and local contexts. There were times where the language used and available terminology to convey meaning around the social and power dynamics inherent in being 'raced' and 'racialised' was not adequate, especially given the range of local terms used to indicate race categories, but before explaining this fully, it is instructive to firstly look at the landscape that forms the object of study.

The two largest racial groups of Trinidad and Tobago are mainly of African and Indian descent, with the latter also known as East Indians or Indians in everyday parlance and 'African', 'Creole' and 'Black' referring to the African descent population. Indo-Trinidadian and Afro-Trinidadian are used more prominently in academic and political discourse (Munasinghe, 1997). Before proceeding, while the terms Indian, East Indian and Indo-Trinidadian are commonly used to refer to the same group of people, in this work, the terms are used with caution as each carry different connotations. For example, East Indian was a term used to make the distinction from the Indigenous population also called 'Indians' and from the existing 'West Indian' populations. To clarify, in this book, the term East Indian will be used only to make reference to the era when it signified a marginal and subaltern position in relation to the national identity of Trinidadian. The term Indo-Trinidadian is frequently posited as an alternative to this position and is seen as encompassing both an ethnic and national identity. However, this is critiqued further on in a discussion on the validity of the connection between diaspora and the hyphenated identity of Indo-Trinidadian in relation to lived everyday experience. The more popular term, Indian, is the one I shall be largely using throughout this book to refer to a racialised and/or ethnicised identity alongside Indian Trinidadian. A further point of clarification is that race is not used here to validate the construct, but rather as reflection of the category used as identifying markers by the respondents in this study. On the whole, race is commonly deployed in Trinidad

> ...to differentiate between the major ancestral groups–African, European and East Indian–and to describe the relations between them. The term ethnic, however, is largely limited to the intellectual (and sometimes) political arena. It is not a term that has effectively penetrated common discourse.
>
> (Munasinghe, 1997: 72)

Ethnicity may be the globally legitimate term when looking at different ethnic groups in multi-cultural nation-states, but the local conceptualisations of ethnicity and race are different as highlighted by Viranjini Munasinghe (1997) in the above statement. It also underscores the complexity of Trinidadian society, where diverse ancestral groups coexist, and the challenge of bridging academic concepts with everyday realities whilst inviting further exploration into how language shapes perceptions of identity and the role of academic discourse in reflecting and influencing societal attitudes towards race.

This work holds that a critical exploration of young women's understandings and lived experiences is necessary when looking at contemporary raced, ethnicised and gendered identities and identifications in Trinidad. As intersecting categories, race, ethnicity and gender are lived and configured through material and discursive processes. In this work, these processes are explored through an engagement with the raced gender performativity of Dougla poetics where the fixed lines around race and ethnicity discourses become more permeable. Thus, we can theorise about gendered readings of ethnicity and race through both fluidity and fixity rather than concentrating on a universal category of mixedness and Indianness which has often been read in essentialist and/or 'traditional' ways with its own 'original' referents. Aisha Khan (2004) makes the sound claim that there is no such thing as pure cultures, as cultural forms are already mixed. This thinking necessitates a critical approach to the politics of purity and mixedness and what Khan describes as 'mixing metaphors'. Instead of conceiving of mixed parts resulting in contested differences, it is perhaps more instructive to think of these parts as being in relation (Glissant, 1997: 185). This, however, is not a static process and relation is marked by multiple dynamics. Therefore, the guiding question that permeates all the chapters, simply stated, is how do young women of mixed Indian descent navigate mixedness, Indianness and Trinidadian-ness, that is, the Dougla poetics of national/individual identifications through raced gender performativity?

Trini Talk and Writing Race

The four tenets of Black feminist epistemology (alternative epistemologies built upon lived experience and not an objectified position; the use of dialogue rather than adversarial debate; ethics of caring; personal accountability) set out by Patricia Hill Collins (2000) are not only abstract recommendations but also have inspired a particular methodology for this research. In Black Feminist epistemology, a method has emerged that approaches 'talk' not as a mode of representation but as a form of knowing in itself as bell Hooks (1990: 147) illustrates in this statement where she speaks about her efforts to speak different knowledges,

> It is no easy task to find ways that include our multiple voices within the texts that we create — in film, poetry, feminist theory….I feel it even now, writing this piece when I gave it talking and reading, talking spontaneously, using familiar academic speech now and then, 'talking the talk'— using [B]lack vernacular speech, the intimate sounds and gestures I normally save for family and loved ones. Private speech in public discourse,